



◆ IN THE LAND OF ◆ LEADALE

7

Ceez

[ILLUSTRATION BY]

Tenmaso

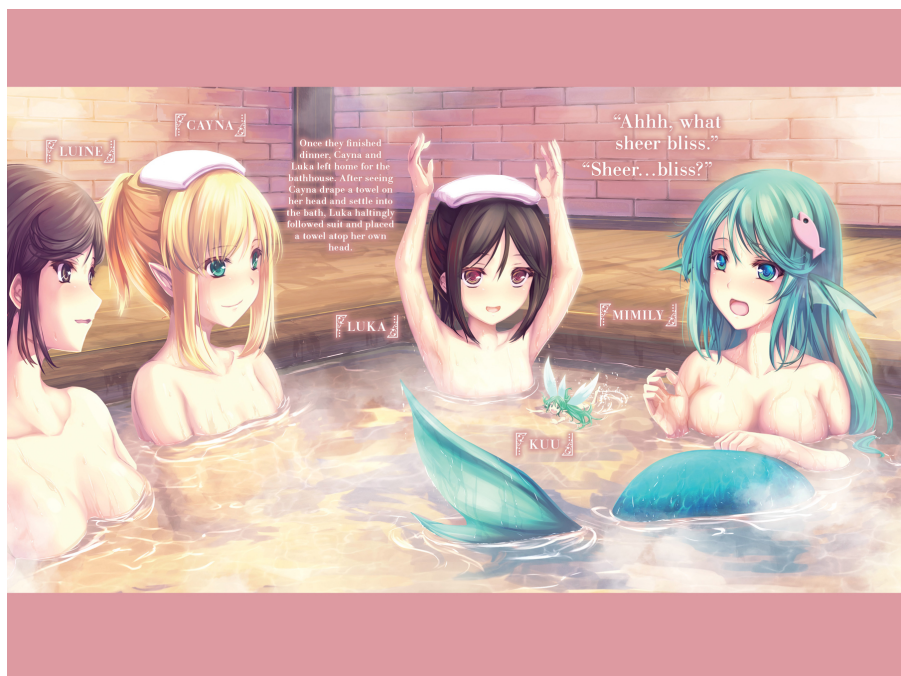


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Once they finished dinner, Cayna and Luka left home for the bathhouse. After seeing Cayna drape a towel on her head and settle into the bath, Luka haltingly followed suit and placed a towel atop her own head.

“Ahhh, what sheer bliss.”
“Sheer... bliss?”

LUKA

MIMILY

KUU

CAYNA

LUINE



"It's been quite some time, dearest Aunt. About two centuries, I daresay."

"Um, Sahala... shade, was it?"

SAHALASHADE

"Indeed, I am Sahalashade. 'Tis a pleasure to finally see you."

♦ IN THE LAND OF ♦ LEADALE ♦

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In the Land of Leadale 7

Ceez

Translation by Jessica Lange

Cover art by Tenmaso

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RIADEIRU NO DAICHI NITE Vol. 7

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First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: December 2022
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Rachel Mimms
Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ceez, author. | Tenmaso, illustrator. | Lange, Jessica
(Translator), translator.

Title: In the land of Leadale / Ceez ; illustration by Tenmaso ;
translation by Jessica Lange

Other titles: Riadeiru no daichi nite. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2020.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020032160 | ISBN 9781975308681 (v. 1 ; trade
paperback) | ISBN 9781975308704 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN
9781975322168 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975322182 (v.
4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975333447 (v. 5 ; trade paperback)
| ISBN 9781975334598 (v. 6 ; trade paperback) | ISBN
9781975343910 (v. 7 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Virtual reality—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.C4646 In 2020 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020032160>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-4391-0 (paperback)
978-1-9753-4392-7 (ebook)

E3-20221101-JV-NF-ORI

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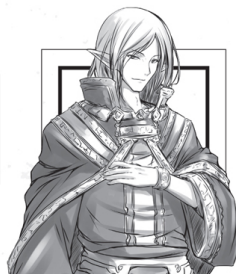


Cayna

Also known as the Silver Ring Witch, she was a top player of the VRMMORPG *Leadale* back in its heyday. Became an adventurer upon getting reincarnated two hundred years after the game's service ended.

Skargo

Eldest of the three NPC children Cayna raised in the Game Era. Now the High Priest, this peerless beauty is outranked only by the king and prime minister. Constantly uses Oscar—Roses Scatter with Beauty to adorn himself with flowers, ocean waves, and sound effects.



Mai-Mai

Skargo's younger elven sister who specializes in attack magic. In this world, she is a former Imperial Mage who currently serves as headmaster of the Royal Academy. Constantly bickering with Skargo, although they both love Cayna above all else.



Kartatz

A dwarf and the youngest of Cayna's three adopted children. A master builder whose fortresses, castles, and dungeons are second to none, he has more common sense than Skargo and Mai-Mai combined.





Marelle

◆◆
The proprietress of the inn where Cayna first awoke. Acts like a second mother to her.



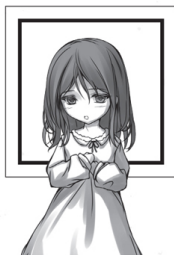
Lytt

◆◆
Marelle's daughter who helps run the family inn. Looks up to Cayna like a big sister.



Elineh

◆◆
An astute kobold merchant and caravan leader. Disconcerted by Cayna's terrible business sense, he drills the basics into her while relying on her skills as an adventurer.



Luka

◆◆
The sole survivor of her fishing village after it was razed by a ghost ship. Cayna decided to adopt her, and now they live together in the remote village.



Roxilius

◆◆
Cayna's diligent butler. He teaches Luka and the other village children reading, writing, and arithmetic.



Roxine

◆◆
Cayna's maid who oversees the housework and helps look after Luka. She and Roxilius fight like cats and dogs.



Opus

(Opusketenshultheimer
Crosstett(bomber))

◆◆
Cayna's friend and partner since the game's beta phase. A carefree demon and special kind of idiot. However, in truth, he is also a skilled tactician once known as Leadale's Kongming.



Siren

◆◆
Opus's maid summons who has the courage to serve a troublemaker like Opus.

The Story Thus Far

After a terrible accident left her permanently bedridden, VRMMORPG *Leadale* became Keina Kagami's only solace. However, she sadly died after a power outage caused her life support to malfunction.

Suddenly, she woke up in an unfamiliar room and was flustered to find she looked just like her high elf avatar from the game. After listening to the young girl Lytt, who had come to wake Keina, and her mother, the inn proprietress Marelle, Keina was shocked to learn that this modern world was *Leadale* two hundred years in the future. Bolstered by her support AI, Kee, Keina decided to become Cayna and start a new life.

Cayna first awakened her own Guardian Tower then, as per the Guardian's request, and set off on a journey to awaken the other towers that had fallen dormant. However, her knowledge of this new environment was tenuous at best. And so she learned the ropes from two acquaintances she'd met in the remote village—the caravan kobold merchant Elineh and his guard Arbiter, leader of the Flame Spear mercenaries.

After arriving in the Felskeilo capital and registering with the Adventurers Guild, Cayna ran into a veteran soldier named Agaido and his granddaughter Lonti. They asked her to capture a young boy who was gallivanting around town. The boy and his friends tried to escape by boat, and Cayna drew the citizens' attention as she chased them across the river on foot. Her main target was a prince who had run away from the castle. Once he was safely in custody, Agaido rewarded her efforts and offered the support of the nobility.

Cayna soon learned that she even had children of her own: the

High Priest Skargo, the headmaster of the Royal Academy Mai-Mai, and the master shipbuilder Kartatz. After finally seeing Kartatz, Cayna was glad they could reunite in this world. She told him she was now an adventurer and that he could call on her anytime.

Kartatz used Telepathy to contact Skargo and Mai-Mai and let them know Cayna was in the capital. Although concerned that the eldest son, Skargo, might run wild, Kartatz and Mai-Mai discussed how they could help their mother.

As Cayna grew more familiar with the capital, she met up with Mai-Mai as part of a request from the Adventurers Guild and was shocked to discover her daughter was married.

Afterward, she took on another guild request and set out for the Battle Arena. Her hopeful heart sang when it turned out to be a tower, at least until the smoky Guardian revealed the truth behind its Skill Master's final words.

Cayna fell into a daze upon discovering she was the last *Leadale* player in existence, and Skargo rushed to her side with a bevy of skill effects in tow. Nonetheless, his befuddled mother's fist sent him straight through the ceiling. She locked herself up in an impenetrable barrier, leaving Mai-Mai and Kartatz with no other choice but to collect Skargo and leave.

Afterward, Skargo went ballistic for another reason entirely and enraged Mai-Mai. This sparked a vicious sibling fight and outburst of savage spells. Kartatz, who managed to escape the carnage, tore at his hair and questioned their meaningless suffering when he found Cayna out of her hidey-hole and casually buying food.

After putting Skargo and Mai-Mai's quarrel to rest with a single knockout drug, Cayna apologized to her children for her absence. Each forgave her with a smile, and everyone vowed to become a family once again.

Cayna then accepted a request from Elineh to guard his caravan, and they set out for the northern nation of Helshper. Mai-Mai, who came to say good-bye, asked Cayna if she could also deliver a letter. Unaware of the chaos this would unleash only days later, the high elf gladly accepted.

On the way, she stopped by a remote village, rescued the mermaid Mimily, who had been lost in the underground waterways, and moved the caravan across a broken bridge with water-walking magic.

Bandits from the west greeted them at the fortress along the national border, but Cayna and the mercenaries defeated them with ease before arriving in Helshper. Cayna then visited a company called Sakaiya to deliver Mai-Mai's letter. The recipient was its founder and owner Caerick, who was Mai-Mai's son and, by extension, Cayna's grandson. A minor clash of opinion caused Cayna to run out of

Sakaiya in a huff, and her confusion peaked when she learned that Caerina, a female knight who had been investigating the incident at the border, was also her grandchild.

Cayna stopped by the Adventurers Guild to ask around about the possible Guardian Tower Elineh told her about. It was in a region overrun by bandits, so she sought Caerick's aid by any means necessary.

She reached the fortress's front lines, but they were soon attacked by rock golems. Although the Helshper knights' defeat appeared imminent, Cayna's intervention saved them in the nick of time. Caerina allowed her to enter the stronghold as a show of gratitude, and when Cayna finally arrived at the tower in question, she fought the bandit leader, who also happened to be a player.

The demon player, adamant that everything was still a game, stood no chance against Cayna. The moment he realized their new world was a reality, he broke down into wailing sobs. She was ready to end him, but Caerina and the Helshper knights vouched for his life at the last second.

In no mood to fight, Cayna handed the demon over to the knights. However, she also placed a collar on him. This item reduced a player's abilities, and it was here he realized Cayna was a Skill Master.

Inside the tower, the reawakened Guardian threw Cayna for another loop when it informed her that its original Skill Master was Opus. She held tight to the possibility her old guildmate and terrible friend was still alive somewhere in this world.

The Guardian then entrusted a book to her, and a fairy visible only to Cayna soon popped out of it. Opus was growing more enigmatic by the second.

She ran into Kartatz on her way back to Felskeilo. He was in the middle of fixing a broken bridge, so mother and son worked together to finish the job.

After returning to Felskeilo, Cayna accepted a hunting request from the Adventurers Guild and ran into Lonti and her friend Mye. The girls ended up joining the excursion and marveled at Cayna's many spectacular feats.

Meanwhile, back in Felskeilo, Lopus was desperate to replicate Cayna's skills and threw one of his failed experiments into a garbage pit. Unfortunately, this was a Collection Point during wartime events in the Game Era. It was also where an enemy known to drop special items spawned. By some bizarre coincidence, the garbage pit reacted to the trash and caused a dolphin-headed penguin monster to appear.

As Felskeilo fell into chaos, two players dashed through the city. Oddly enough, Shining Saber and Cohral were former members of the same guild who had just happened to reunite right before everything

went wrong. Cohral shared the knight captain's sense of duty, and both fought with every skill in their arsenal despite the monster's obvious advantage. Nevertheless, its powerful counterattack was too great and severely wounded them both. The country's best mages put up a hard fight as well, but it was no use against such a foe.

Cayna's Li'l Fairy whispered in her ear and filled her with an ominous premonition. So Cayna dealt with the monster from outside the city. It stood no chance against her unbridled might and instantly vanished in a pillar of fire.

After the incident, Cayna met up with Shining Saber and Cohral. They shared the truth behind *Leadale's* fate, and she discovered that the game had actually ended service. Furthermore, Cohral told her there was a sunken Guardian Tower off Felskeilo's coast. As compensation for the info, she gave them both new skills.

Cayna returned to the village for a bit, and the villagers urged her to live there full-time. She happily agreed and decided to bring it up with the elder. At the same time, she met a group from Otaloquess who were visiting for research purposes.

A pair of adventurer siblings accompanied the group. The younger sister had it in for Cayna, but she took down the werecat with ease. The elder brother, Cloffe, immediately changed his tune upon Clofia's defeat. He knelt before Cayna as an emissary of Otaloquess and said their queen was her niece. Queen Sahalashade was the Foster Child of Sahana, a former high elf community member whom Cayna saw as a little sister. Refusing Cloffe's invitation to Otaloquess, she shuddered at the fact everyone she met had deep government ties.

Upon returning to Felskeilo, Cayna decided to join a group of knights heading out to take care of the leftover bandits. Thanks to her overfriendly banter with Shining Saber, however, the knights mistakenly got the idea the two were engaged.

After overcoming an odd incident along the way, Cayna parted with the knights and entered a fishing village enveloped in a mysterious fog. As she walked through the unsettling village that was crawling with zombies, she ran into an adventurer named Quolkeh, who had also come to investigate.

In a small underground cellar, Quolkeh and another familiar face protected a small girl—the village's only survivor. Cayna had asked the pair for directions in the Helshper guild earlier and realized they were players.

The second figure, a dragoid, was Cayna's former guildmate back in the game. Exis was his sub-account, but his main identity was a realist named Tartarus. As the two rekindled their old friendship, everyone worked together to protect the young girl. To help them, Cayna summoned a butler named Roxilius as well. The ghost ship and

its prisoners were no match against the trio and crumbled away almost instantly.

After releasing the Palace of the Dragon King, that is, the Guardian Tower of the Sixth Skill Master, Cayna decided to take in the young girl who had nowhere else to go. She summoned another assistant, this time a maid named Roxine. Together with Luka and the werecats, Cayna built a new home in her remote village.

As the next chapter of their lives began, Cayna fulfilled her long-awaited promise to Lytt and called upon a summons for a sky tour. Luka and the local engineer's son, Latem, joined in as well.

As Cayna and the three children took in the scenery around the village, they came across monsters attacking Elineh's caravan. Cayna mowed these down and pulled the Flame Spears out of a tight spot. She soon realized quest enemies were lurking around the village, thanks to a magical item, and she swiftly destroyed it with the help of Arbiter and the others.

However, the three children ran into trouble when they left the village on their own to make flower crowns. Just as monsters had them surrounded in a flower field, a White Dragon burst from the pendant Cayna gave Luka and came to their rescue. It scattered the enemy as its breath attack carved deep scars across the forest floor. Cayna raced back to the village to confirm that the children were safe.

Later, Cayna headed to Sakaiya for daily necessities and introduced Cohral, who was on a mission for the Adventurers Guild, to her great-grandson Idzik.

Caerick informed her that a meeting would be held on the national border, and Skargo greeted Cayna upon her return to the village. He would be the king's representative throughout the conference.

Cayna and Roxilius continued bolstering the village's defenses to the point where even players would suffer instant death.

Cayna brought Lytt and Luka to Felskeilo in hopes of showing them more of the world. Together with Roxine, the girls climbed aboard a golem wagon and joined Elineh's caravan.

However, the wagon's uniqueness attracted the attention of troublesome nobles, and Elineh warned Cayna she was being secretly targeted. Amid all this, they arrived in Felskeilo during its annual River Festival.

Unfortunately, the festival couldn't fully commence, thanks to a large unidentified shadow spotted in the Ejidd River. A blanket of anxiety was cast over the town, and Cayna set out to eliminate the massive shadow on behalf of the Adventurers Guild. After moving into the rental home provided by Elineh's company, Cayna left the children with Roxine and another summons before investigating the river.

Around the same time, a shadowy organization took on a request from a noble and plotted to abduct Cayna's loved ones. However, Roxine protected the girls and fended off any who dared threaten them. The thugs scurried back to their hideout only to find terrifying fiends sent from elsewhere waiting for them. The men were then subjected to horrific atrocities and transformed into grisly works of art against their will. Both these grotesque statues and the name of a spine-chilling devil were soon discovered by knights who immediately raised the alarm.

Cayna was then called upon by the Battle Arena Guardian, and when she arrived, she learned the true identity of the unsettling shadow. It was a mobile Guardian Tower that had traveled upstream from the ocean after reacting to her Guardian Ring. Cayna concocted an outlandish plan to keep this white whale tower in Felskeilo and, via her personal connections, sought the aid of the knights and princess.

The ruse was a success, and the white whale tower was enshrined as a divine messenger upstream of the sandbar. With nothing else to fear, Felskeilo's River Festival finally commenced as the capital was wrapped in an unbeatable energy.

Cayna was enjoying the festival with the children when she stopped by the Royal Academy and got in a tussle with an arrogant young lord. Unfortunately for him, no one stood a chance against a Limit Breaker/Skill Master mage. The man was as helpless as a kitten.

As echoes of the festival rang throughout the night, the noble who had tried to deceive Cayna was attacked by two hell spawn and a demon who decided the man's fate with a coin toss.

Cayna later visited the workshop on the sandbar to thank Kartatz for the lumber she used to build her home in the village. As the children took in the sights, she found herself with a bit of free time and decided to go fishing. Cayna caught one big haul after another until finally reeling in a chimera-like monster. She defeated this with ease, but the rare ore it dropped told her the creature was an Event Monster from somewhere or other.

Cayna, Roxine, and the girls then ran into Skargo and Cohral on their way back to the village. However, when they returned home, they found Roxilius prostrated in the entranceway, along with a single letter. It had only one command: "*Name her.*"

Realizing the subject in question was Li'l Fairy, Cayna gave her the name "Kuu," since she was like a little sister to Kee. When she introduced Kuu to the villagers, she was perplexed to learn that encountering a fairy in this world supposedly brought good luck.

Caerick later called upon Cayna to deal with the rhymestones he sold wholesale. She introduced Kuu to him and Idzik and took on

another request that conveniently popped up.

This request was an urgent message from the player Shining Saber. He said monsters were attacking Felskeilo, and she rushed over to help. At the eastern gate, Cayna saved the soldiers being harassed by pteras from the Dinosaur Series. Once these were eliminated, she ordered everyone to evacuate and proceeded to crush the enemy's main forces.

After mercilessly decimating the invading monsters, Cayna sent Li'l P, the crimson pig, on ahead as a barrier against a flying column that was approaching the western gate.

At the same time, back in the southern nation of Otaloquess, a giant tortoise that served as a popular tourist attraction went haywire and ended up on a collision course headed straight for the castle. Knights and adventurers alike were recruited to deal with the crisis, and the plan was to convince whoever lived on top of its shell to shift the tortoise's course. Quolkeh and Exis answered this request as well.

While on the job, they incidentally teamed up with an old dwarf named Hidden Ogre, who also happened to be a Skill Master. As soon as they entered the building on the tortoise's back, the trio was greeted by a TV studio. A delinquent Buddha Guardian then threw them into a quiz game that would test the limits of their sanity.

Although Quolkeh was disqualified, Exis and Hidden Ogre won just in the nick of time and stopped the tortoise from slamming into the Otaloquess castle.

Back in Felskeilo, the city was still under attack, and a unique monster had taken control of the knights. The possessed knights ended up fighting the adventurers, but the latter had long grown sick and tired of their arrogance. With a bit of instigation from Arbiter, the adventurers unleashed their pent-up resentment and incapacitated the knights. Cayna then burst in with Li'l P and annihilated the monster who led the charge.

Skargo had served as a vanguard during the battle, and she later set up a meeting with him.

However, to her surprise, the royal family joined them as well. The king and queen wished to thank Cayna for watching over the prince and princess and defending the capital.

In her hunt for Opus's whereabouts, Cayna asked Skargo about the Night Sanctuary that Kuu had mentioned, but she was unable to glean any useful information. However, after delving into her own memories, Cayna realized she'd misheard the name and quickly pinpointed the demon's location. It was a dungeon she had built with Opus in the past to mess with newbie players. The dungeon was currently in Otaloquess, and Cayna was surprised to discover that a village of people eager to dive inside had been built up around it.

After reaching Otaloquess, Cayna ran into Cloffe and Clofia, the werecat siblings she had previously met in the remote village. They accompanied her for various reasons, and together with Kuu, the four entered the dungeon.

Since it had been created with players in mind, the skill-less Clofia was unable to sense danger and was hilariously baptized as she led the way and fell into every conceivable trap. Monsters too powerful for modern-day adventurers began to crop up, and Cayna unleashed her full might.

Clofia was moved by this display of strength, and along the way she learned from her brother that Cayna was the aunt of her beloved queen. Clofia's attitude did a sudden 180, and her subsequent guilt led her into yet another trap.

To save Clofia, Cayna forced her way through the remaining levels and finally reached the last floor. As she dealt with a midboss demon, a careless comment triggered her trauma. Absolutely livid, Cayna used a multitude of Special Skills to finish him off.

Then, after endless searching, she finally reunited with Opus on the bottommost floor. However, his unbelievably lazy welcome pushed Cayna off the deep end. Together with Kuu, she attacked Opus with the mightiest spell in her arsenal.

Her Special Skills depleted Cayna's MP and left her in a weakened state. Ironically enough, it was Opus who saved her. They all moved to a hidden house in a corner of the dungeon village, and he left Cayna in the care of his elf maid, Siren, before leaving to take care of personal business.

The person he met in secret was the owner of a tool shop in the dungeon village as well as a former player. The man swore to help Opus someday, and the two parted ways.

Cayna and Opus slowly made their way back to the remote village by wagon, but the demon dropped several shocking revelations along the way.

For instance, there was the fact that the VRMMO *Leadale* was made specifically for Keina Kagami. Furthermore, soon after Cayna lost her body and came to their current world, she slept in a dungeon for two hundred years before being dropped off at the inn. During this entire period, her soul was being installed into the game system. In addition, Kuu was in charge of the game's subsystem.

Incidentally, Cayna was suspicious of the familiar relationship between Opus and Kee. Both casually dodged the issue.

Around this same time, Caerina invited the former player and bandit leader who had been sent to work in the Helshper mines to become her soldier.

When Cayna returned to the village, she introduced Opus and

Siren to Roxine, Roxilius, and Luka. Siren thoroughly punished the Double Rs for bickering and failing their duties. The elf soon became the head maid of Cayna's household. The village held a welcome banquet for Opus, and both he and Cayna served as the night's entertainment.

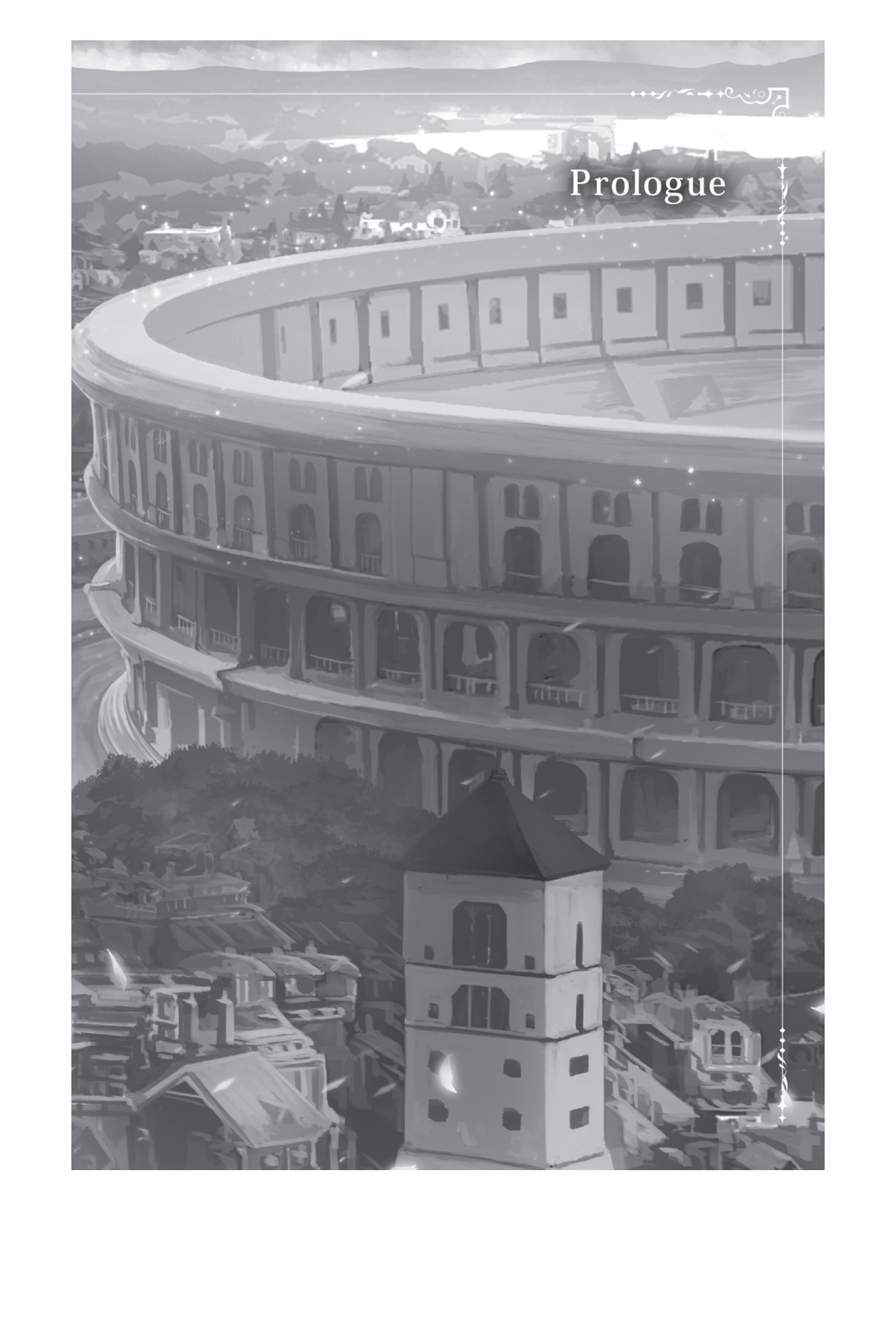
The next day, Opus told Cayna how the game world had become their current world. Cayna, Luka, and Opus then flew to the demon's Guardian Tower. Thanks to the benefits of the game system, Cayna confirmed she could add nonplayers like Luka to her party.

When they arrived in Helshper, Cayna and the others received word from Siren that several Helshper knights had come to the village. Cayna reunited with Elineh and Arbiter at the inn and introduced Opus. Cayna set off for the castle, but Opus, Luka, and Kuu went to the Adventurers Guild, where they ran into Quolkeh and Exis. Opus proceeded to torment Exis just like back in the old days.

Cayna arrived at the castle, and Caerina led her to the knights. There, she spoke with the former bandit leader player who said Caerina had offered to make him a soldier. Cayna was summoned to remove his Punishment Collar so he could move freely.

After releasing the collar of the demon player/bandit leader Luvrogue and messing with him out of revenge, Cayna left Helshper with Elineh's caravan.

She later heard about a tourney and wondered if she could use rhymestones to broadcast the far-off event to the village. She spoke to Opus but was shocked to learn that their guild, which had once stored many useful tools, was destroyed on the game's very last day of service.



Prologue

A white nothingness stretched into infinity across the enigmatic space. The exact location was unclear, and none could agree on where it began. All was still and lifeless. There was only a lonely silence. Very few knew of this place or its purpose. It simply existed.

When it came down to it, this space was best suited for individual use. However, such opportunities were few and far between.

Two of the select few who did utilize it were facing each other at a low tea table. The two creatures had been locked in a wordless staring contest for some time.

In truth, the term “creatures” wasn’t entirely accurate.

One was a small, coiled snake that looked more like a faint illusion.

The other was an old crow outlined by a hazy silhouette. An occasional cluster of noise particles sparked from its body.

It was unknown how long they’d been in this space, and one couldn’t help but ponder their true identities. The situation felt much like a formal interview. The snake broke the silence.

“Haven’t you been acting too familiar with the master lately, crow?”

“...Hmph.”

The crow’s eyes narrowed sharply at this reproachful comment and radiated an aura as menacing as any blade tip. Nonetheless, the snake’s appearance belied its steadfast will.

“It is what it is. Hide all you want inside, but I’m my own person now.”

Lowering its arched neck, the snake flicked its tongue, then licked its snout.

“Did we really need to meet here of all places?”

“You-know-who won’t hear us in this space. That was part

of the deal."

The snake looked down in shame and reluctantly nodded before lifting its head again.

"It's been some time since we met like this, crow."

"Not since I left a certain someone at the inn, snake."

"Should we use our current names?"

"Names are useless here. There's no need."

The snake's eyes sparkled with amusement, but the crow's answer was brusque. It wasn't as if they normally met here to engage in foolish banter. This space would dissolve once their business was concluded, and the crow simply didn't want to leave behind any extraneous information.

"You've had plenty of opportunity to talk, but I would have given a few more details about the situation."

"Why complain now? Whether it be this time, last time, or the time before that, our plans have not changed."

The crow nimbly raised its wingtips in a shrugging gesture. The snake simply cast a downward glance, as if to say, *Have it your way*, then shook its head.

"You should just leave me with him and stop worrying already."

"Do you think you-know-who is the type to notice someone at one second and abandon them the next?"

"Hmph..."

"Besides, it's not like you can put all the added guidance on me. You can communicate faster, so get on it." These last words felt more like they'd expressed a desire to make the snake see reason than to reprimand.

"Wasn't that your idea? Accept responsibility for once and do your part."

"...The world is ever cruel. Sometimes I just need a kind word."

"Why not ask him for one?"

"I suspect I would only be blown away by a blast of magic..."

The snake glared sharply as the crow hid its face behind a wing and pretended to cry.

"There are limits to escapism, crow."

"And, as usual, you can't take a joke."

With a click of its tongue, the crow spread its wings as if nothing had happened and reverted to its typical aloofness. Despite the snake's

endless protests, their long history had already proved its efforts to be futile. Nevertheless, these ingrained complaints were an intrinsic part of their dysfunctional yet inseparable bond.

"You-know-what is still scheduled to awaken, right?"

"It's an old relic and a lasting reminder of our forced connection. Unless we gather up all involved and destroy it, it will become a source of distortion."

The snake and crow both sighed. It was a troublesome yet inevitable issue, and they had no choice but to use every weapon in their arsenal. Even the master they held so dear.

"I'll contact you when I have more details."

"Right."

"Actually, you can just listen in when I tell you-know-who."

And so their brief meeting ended. Could this really be considered a meeting, though? It was more like a vent session.

Not that the silence could complain.

Finally, the two said their quick good-byes and immediately vanished. Cracks then began forming as the white, nameless space smoothly disintegrated around the edges. The sparkling remnants popped and crackled until nothing was left.

CHAPTER 1

An Eyeball, a Search,
a Guardian, and a Queen

“Um...”

“Come now, Lady Cayna. Go ahead and take it. It’s all right.”

“I hear you, but...”

At Roxine’s insistence, Cayna looked at the fruit in front of her and grimaced.

The pair were exploring the forest near the remote village and found several bushes laden with small red berries. These fruits, small enough to be eaten in a single bite, were a wild variety of *ruche*. Even most of the adult villagers loved this sweet harvest blessing, but the berries were also rare and therefore valuable. Furthermore, the forest provided for both the remote village and the surrounding wildlife. Carelessness could easily lead to an encounter with a ferocious beast.

These two, however, were the rare exception. One was the continent’s greatest mage, while the other was a combative maid with a competitive streak.

Regardless, Cayna was heading outside the village to conduct experiments when Roxine offered to accompany her. This request had nothing to do with concern for her master’s well-being; Roxine had simply decided to tag along while prioritizing her own affairs. At present, the werecat’s only purpose in leading Cayna into the forest was so she could gather various ingredients for dessert.

Being used to run errands for her servant was more than enough justification for Cayna to grow livid, but she went along with it. After all, it was no secret that Roxine was crafty, and Cayna had no plans to complain anyway.

“Cie, can you tell which ones are ripe just by looking?”

“Of course. Please do not underestimate my one hundred years of maid experience.”

“R-right. Can’t argue that.”

Roxine’s cat ears pricked up, and she thrust her chest out proudly.

Cayna smiled awkwardly and tiredly thought, *Yeah, there's no way you've been working that long.*

Roxine was a maid summons, so she'd been called upon in the game maybe a dozen or so times. Only about half a year had passed since she'd come to this world, which cast a shadow over her centenarian claims.

"Still, I must admit I exaggerate. Lady Cayna, you are far more versed in botany, correct?"

Roxine's pompous attitude suddenly vanished, and she turned around with an easygoing smile.

"Oh, you knew about that?"

"Honestly now. You are my one and only master. My honor as a maid requires me to at least have a basic understanding of you."

"'Maid's honor,' huh...?"

Cayna questioned whether there was even enough information about her to make such a statement. She underestimated herself, of course, and since the maid and butler had long taken her personality into account, Roxine completely disregarded this response.

As for her botanical knowledge, Cayna was an expert, thanks to her race. Since high elves could hear the voices of plants, it was easy to reap nature's bounty. This was what most gamers would call "flavor text."

Since coming to this world, Cayna really could hear the plants' voices and confirm the unmistakable benefits. However, the mental torment of hearing their screams of anguish every time she went to pick plants made it clear the skill definitely had its pros and cons.

"Well then. By my estimation, you may pick as you please. Still, what are your thoughts, Lady Cayna?"

"Right..."

As Roxine looked at her with a hopeful smile, Cayna could hear several clusters of berries literally begging her to eat them. Each was bright red and ripe for the picking. Whatever the reason, she was at least relieved they weren't screaming.

"They all seem fine to me."

"Understood."

The maid beamed as she began hunting for berries. Meanwhile, Cayna turned and spoke to the figure over her left shoulder.

"You guys can probably see them—what do you think?"

"*No problemo!*"

"*I see no issue.*"

The first speaker was incessantly cheerful, and Cayna could imagine the other nodding with his arms crossed: Kuu had given her approval first, followed by Opus.

Cayna was communicating with them via an eyeball the size of a

human head. It hovered over her shoulder the same way Kuu often did. Cayna had retrieved this item, known as a Pair of Eyes, from the Item Box in her tower.

Back in a corner of the inn dining hall, several village children were staring intently at the disembodied eyeball floating above the table. Luka, Lytt, and Latem were joined by Kuu, Opus, Siren, and a pale Mimily.



The kids normally would have been just as pallid as Mimily, but their experience with creatures like the griffin had made them bold. Something like an eyeball no longer fazed them. Furthermore, since anything of Cayna's was unlikely to harm them, the trio were fascinated by the item's effects despite its bizarre appearance.

"What is this unpleasant thing...?"

Mimily had stopped by to pick up her usual meal but let out an impressive yelp when she saw the giant eyeball floating over the dining table. It was undoubtedly a freakish sight to the uninitiated.

"Here, you'll see something interesting," Opus said, dragging the flustered mermaid over against her will. The reluctant Mimily didn't get any closer to the eyeball than absolutely necessary. Needless to say, the children's relentless comments about how "cool" it was left her confused.

The eyeball before them was one half of a Pair of Eyes; the other half was with Cayna. As the name suggested, it was a two-for-one item with a single effect that could transfer imagery from one eye to the other.

"All issues aside, it's operating normally," Opus remarked.

"We can only watch!" said Kuu.

Mimily and the children glanced over at the cackling Kuu but soon turned back to the eyeball to watch Cayna and Roxine pick forest nuts and fruits in real time. The kids were too small to safely venture beyond the village and thought it was a spectacular sight. Well, to be fair, the outside world still felt like a terrifying place, given their previous incident.

"Never figured there'd be places like that close to the village," Latem said in amazement.

"So...this is how...Cie picks our food."

"Mr. Lottor's always been the one to bring back whatever we asked, but he did say it wasn't easy."

Luka was watching with keen interest while Lytt was explaining the history of the village's collective sweet tooth. Although their hamlet wasn't very big, there was still significant pressure on Lottor as the sole hunter.

Roxine had recently taken to harvesting on the outskirts of the village; she turned the tables on any wild beast who dared attack her and brought them home in the form of fresh meat. Meanwhile, Siren and Roxilius started hunting as well after Opus grumbled about the village's lack of protein, and Lottor was gradually beaten at his own game.

As one might expect, Cayna had no intention of disturbing the village's power balance. Opus therefore made sure everything

remained fair and that no one received more meat than necessary. Roxine's and Siren's Item Boxes unfortunately (?) became storage for surplus meat as a result.

Cayna also developed a life hack: Whenever she had more meat than she knew what to do with, she would fly to Helshper to transfer it to Sakaiya. That said, Sakaiya had its own foodstuffs division and lacked adequate space for Cayna's surplus.

"I knew it," Opus grumbled. "This is pretty much the most people who can watch at once."

He returned to the subject at hand: the Pair of Eyes' limitations. Only those crowded around the table could watch what the eye was projecting. Furthermore, there was no audio.

On-screen, Cayna and Roxine were chatting pleasantly as they visited various Collection Points. However, the lack of voices or music made it like a silent documentary. Of course, this world had no tradition of adding background music to videos, and an item that allowed several people to remotely watch footage together had enough of a wow factor anyway.

"Yep, it's official! I need a projector!"

The door to the dining hall clattered open as Cayna suddenly burst in.

""Wah?! That scared me!"" Latem and Lytt shouted in surprise.

"Using your skills to slam the door and make an entrance was uncalled for."

"I figured timing is everything, and one thing led to another."

As Opus complained about her method of reappearance, Cayna boldly stuck out her tongue and smirked.

"Quit startlin' the kids!" Marelle chided, to which Cayna replied, "Oops, sorry," with a bow of her head.

The door to the dining hall was left open throughout the day, but she had quietly shut this before using the Pull skill to reopen it and announce her arrival—with a loud SFX to boot. Luka murmured "That...surprised me" three or four beats after everyone else. Kuu, seated atop her head, let out a boisterous laugh.

Roxine entered after Cayna, passing Opus and the children without a care in the world before sharing her bounty with Marelle.

"Sorry again for the trouble," the innkeeper said.

"There is no need to apologize. I could very well say the same thing," the maid replied.

Given a rougher, more vulgar tone, their conversation would be right at home in a period drama. Roxine would have been a massive wolf in sheep's clothing if Roxilius wasn't in the picture. The two had previously fought in the dining hall, so Marelle was aware of their true personalities. However, this didn't matter to the matron in the

least, and her kind attitude toward Roxine never wavered.

Cayna observed Roxine with a sigh, then turned back to Opus, who had collected himself and was waiting for her patiently.

“By projector you mean a Pedestal, correct?” he asked.

“If we’ve got one of those, a whole crowd of people will be able to watch incredible videos and even hear sound.”

It was commonly called a projector, but the item’s official name was a Pedestal. It was part of a series called That Was the Best You Came Up with? and could be combined with the Pair of Eyes as an optional accessory. It was an audio component item that acted as a stereo speaker and came with three cavities in the center to insert several Pairs of Eyes for simultaneous videos. During War Events, the Admins set up a live broadcast for all to see.

However, a Pedestal itself could not be created. It was only available for purchase in shops, so it was impossible to make a new one. As for what was to be done about this...

“We should just *take* one from wherever we can find it!”

Cayna’s pushy suggestion sent Opus’s head into his hands.

“Did you just suggest stealing...?”

“What’s mine is mine! It’s called Gianism! It was in that show about the robot cat!”

“Yes, well, I believe your education has suffered a few missteps.”

Opus shrugged at her incomprehensible logic and shook his head in hopelessness. His statement came from the fact that he had given Cayna a basic education back in the Game Era.

“I’m saying we should investigate any place that might have one from top to bottom!”

“Any place that might have one?”

“You’re not the brightest bulb, aren’t you?” Cayna pouted.

As Opus tilted his head in total cluelessness, Cayna pointed her Skill Master Ring finger at him.

“I mean this.”

“...The Guardian Towers? Yes, I see.”

Opus at last understood and nodded with relief. The Guardian Towers were installed with massive Item Boxes. If luck was on their side, they’d find a Pedestal in one of them.

“You said it was tossed into storage somewhere, but the Item Boxes in the Guardian Towers were just the best I could come up with. I figure we can check out other places, too.”

All the towers she’d located thus far recognized Cayna as their temporary master, hence her Gianism comment.

“So we have the faintest glimmer of hope.”

“Don’t say things to stress me out!”

Cayna slammed Opus’s unnecessary comment. In truth, he was

absolutely right. Even so, she didn't want to hear any negativity right out of the gate.

"In any case, we can discuss it more tomorrow."

Opus motioned with his chin, and Cayna looked over to see several villagers who had just finished the day's work sit down at open spots in the dining hall. The sky was still a faint orange, but the inn had grown lively in that short amount of time.

Cayna glanced around and noticed that Roxine had disappeared during her and Opus's comedy act. The maid had apparently hurried home to help Siren prepare dinner.

The children knew the day's program had ended when the Pair of Eyes vanished in a heartbeat. Lytt's mother called for her to help out, and Latem waved good-bye, looking somewhat disappointed before heading back to his father's workshop.

Cayna then bowed to Marelle, took Luka's hand, and returned home with Opus and Kuu.

"Ahhh, what sheer bliss."

"Sheer...bliss?"

Once they finished dinner, Cayna and Luka left home for the bathhouse. After seeing Cayna drape a towel on her head and settle into the bath, Luka haltingly followed suit and placed a towel atop her own head. It soon slipped off and fell into the water, and she made a sad face.

"Soak it a little more."

"...Like this?"

Kuu, completely naked, glided across the hot water toward Luka like an ice skater and, with the briefest of instructions, told her to dampen and squeeze it. Before long, the wet towel was firmly on Luka's head.

After multiple attempts, Luka and Kuu could tell they'd finally succeeded and smiled in satisfaction. Cayna peeked over at them and let out a shared sigh of relief.

Mimily and several other ladies had joined them in the women's bath. It wasn't yet a full house, but things were getting fairly crowded.

Roxine had been invited along as well, but she curtly declined. She had evidently come while it was still empty and taken a quick bath.

"She seems to be in and out of the water in mere minutes," Mimily noted, looking concerned.

"Eh, Cie's always been the cautious type."

Cayna scratched her cheek with a dry smile. She couldn't figure out why Roxine stubbornly refused everyone except her, but it wasn't like she was hurting anyone, either. Cayna decided to respect Roxine's

privacy.

A plunging noise came from the men's bath on the other side of the wall, and a man scolded Latem. It was most likely his father, Lux.

Meanwhile, Cayna heard Opus threaten Latem: "I'll freeze you if you don't settle down."

There was immediate silence.

Cayna could understand his desire to peacefully enjoy the bath, but his forceful tactics seemed like overkill. Be that as it may, she had no intention of entering the men's bath to speak her mind.

She had another plan.

"Kuu, arrow."

"Yuppers."

Cayna held out her right hand, and Kuu offered the crimson arrow she'd just materialized.

"Kee, give me a calculated target."

"...*Understood.*"

Clearly exasperated, Kee opened a display window for Cayna. It used Opus's voice to determine his location and the estimated parabola. After weighing the red arrow up and down in her hand, she looked up and sent it flying with perfect accuracy over the partition and into the men's bath.

About two seconds later, Cayna heard Opus's pained yelp.

"Damn it! Don't go throwing around dangerous weapons!"

"Yep, that's our Kee for ya. His calculations never fail."

"Kee! I'll remember this, you bastard!"

Opus's furious curses carried over from across the way, but Cayna laughed this off with a sniff and casually sank into the water beside Mimily.

"Ha-ha...ha." The mermaid laughed awkwardly.

"It's okay to laugh, really."

"But I feel bad for poor Opus."

Mimily quickly stifled her laughter. Cayna encouraged her on with a light elbow jab, but the mermaid only mumbled her pity.

Next to Cayna, Luka's dropped jaw strongly contrasted with Kuu, who was clutching her sides in laughter. The girl didn't seem to process the javelin-style comeback that had just occurred.

"Hmm?"

As if she'd been waiting for a quiet moment, one of the village women waded through the water to approach Cayna.

"Luine?"

Luine, Marelle's eldest daughter and Lytt's big sister, sat down next to her. She was already married and only helped out in the dining hall in the evenings. Her husband was one of the young village men Cayna greeted as he tilled the fields.

“My goodness. You’re as lively as ever, Cayna.”

“Ah, were we kids being too noisy? I didn’t mean to disturb you ladies.”

“No, not at all. But aren’t you older than the rest of us?”

Luine smirked as she pointed out the age discrepancy.

Cayna was by far the oldest agewise, but mentally she was still a young girl with meager life experience. She doubted Luine would believe her if she said as much, though. After all, her son Skargo had already visited the village. Even if he, Felskeilo’s walking encyclopedia, claimed Cayna was actually younger than Luine, there was no question it would only be taken as a joke to clear the air.

According to Roxilius, who had witnessed the aforementioned visit in its entirety, Skargo had preached God’s love in the plaza at the elder’s request and roused the wild enthusiasm of heart-eyed village women young and old. Cayna distinctly remembered thinking, *What is he, an enka singer now?*

“And?” Cayna pressed Luine.

“A-and what?”

“Wasn’t there something else you wanted to say?”

“H-how could you tell? Is that another part of getting old?”

“Uh, not exactly.”

Luine enjoyed gossiping with the other village ladies during their occasional bath meetups. Cayna had approached them on a whim before, and they sometimes reached out to her as well. However, the two parties didn’t have much to talk about.

Rather than joining in and nodding along like a bobblehead doll, Cayna preferred to soak in silence. She usually wrapped herself in a faint magical aura of serenity, so the ladies stopped inviting her to their gossip sessions.

Since Luka was with Cayna this time around, those proactive measures had been interrupted and had inspired the friendly Luine to approach.

“Um, so...,” Luine began.

“You’ll need to speak up. Is it a sensitive subject?”

“Well, that’s why it’s so hard to ask.”

Luine remained conflicted for a moment before finally deciding to speak her mind. For whatever reason, she straightened up and peered into Cayna’s eyes.

“Say, Cayna...”

“Yes?”

“What happened to your husband?”

“Huh?”

Luine’s question was one that Cayna had expected to come up at some point, so she and Kee already had the high elf Cayna’s backstory

all lined up.

“I guess you could say death separated us.”

“...What?”

Luine’s face instantly turned pale, and Cayna offered a silent apology. She chuckled apathetically and lowered her head.

“Don’t worry about it. It was a long time ago. There’s no reason for you to feel bad. It’s all good, really.”

“I-I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have asked... Wait, what?”

“Look, it’s fine. Okay?”

“R-really?”

Cayna smiled at the flustered Luine, who fell silent and nodded timidly.

More specifically, the game system was the father of Cayna’s children. However, since it was currently an integral part of Cayna, any misguided attempts to explain would only confuse poor Luine. Although reluctant, she decided to go with the same explanation she’d previously given Skargo. This also provided the convenient excuse that she’d given them up for adoption because she couldn’t handle life as a single mother.

On paper, it was a pretty lame excuse to ignore her children. Moreover, since Cayna had grown world-weary and had hidden away in the forest (or so the three believed), there was nothing they could have done.

Cayna had no other options, so the situation was inevitable. Still, she felt terrible for the children who loved her so dearly.

“What’s wrong, Cayna? Did I upset you?”

“No, no, I’m fine. I was just thinking about something else.”

Luine peered at Cayna, who had her brow furrowed in fierce concentration. As Luka clung to Cayna with a look of concern, it was apparent the elf had gotten carried away. She waved her hand dismissively. Luine wasn’t completely sold, but asked no further questions; needless to say, Cayna breathed a sigh of relief.

The next day, Cayna left the house with Opus and Kuu in tow. She waved to Luka, who watched nervously from the doorway.

“No worries, Lu. We’re just going on a little trip.”

“A little trip!” chirped Kuu.

“Uh-huh... Come home soon...okay?”

“I’ll be honest: You’re one of the strongest people in this world, so where is this vague air of tragic heroism coming from?” Opus asked, staring blankly into the distance and sighing.

Unsure of where this comment even came from, Cayna sulked, unclear about what he meant by a “vague air of tragic heroism.” She seriously wished he wouldn’t spread such negativity when they were

hardly out the door.

Luka's ongoing adulation was at the root of his concern. It was a firepower that could be stamped out with a minor dose of reality, but the pair couldn't let their guard down either way, since doing so might jinx them somehow.

"Well then, Cie, Rox. Watch the house while we're gone, 'kay?"

"Understood."

"Please leave the young lady to us."

Roxine and Roxilius bowed their heads in reverence. The third servant, on the other hand, calmly stood beside Opus.

"You're coming, too, Siren?" Cayna asked.

"Who knows what will happen if I allow my master to run loose."

"G-good point..."

What in the world had caused Siren to distrust Opus so much? Cayna shot her demon friend a suspicious stare, but he shook his head as if to say he was innocent of all charges.

"Anyways, Opus. In addition to both our towers, we've got the Battle Arena, the Palace of the Dragon King, the white whale, and the tortoise, right?"

Opus watched Cayna count on her fingers, and his shoulders drooped.

"So you've finally located half of the towers. Even I don't know exactly where the rest are. This would be much easier if you mastered the system."

"Ugh, sorry I'm still a rookie. Besides, how am I supposed to master something I just discovered the other day and don't even really understand?"

"All you can do is trust your sensibilities. Manipulate it like a chakra."

"How is a vague example like that supposed to help me?!"

Cayna was sick and tired of him treating this like someone else's problem. She'd only recently found out her soul had been synchronized with the game system, so it was unreasonable to assume she could control it at will. It didn't even come with a user's manual, and she didn't feel like there was anything foreign inside her.

Kuu was in charge of the subsystem, but although she was told to link up with Cayna and accompany her, the fairy didn't have the slightest clue, either.

"Well then, you'll just have to gradually become accustomed to it."

"That'll take a hundred years," Cayna moaned dejectedly. She took out each Guardian Ring from her Item Box and raised the one for the Palace of the Dragon King. She opened her mouth to speak but paused.

“What’s the matter?”

“Do I *really* have to say the chant?”

No matter how many times Cayna repeated it, she always shuddered with embarrassment afterward. The password and its various requirements were tiresome to repeat ad nauseam. How was her past self ever okay with this?

“The chant will be necessary until you master your various specs. Get on with it.”

“...Fiiine.”

Feeling dejected, Cayna once again raised her ring to the sky. Opus briefly checked his Stats Window, confirmed four members in their party, and signaled for her to proceed.

Cayna put the faintly luminescent Kuu on her shoulder and loudly invoked the incantation. In truth, she would have preferred to mumble it under her breath. However, since shouting was yet another prerequisite, Cayna had little choice in the matter.

“One who protects in times of trouble! I beseech you to rescue this depraved world from chaos!”

At that very moment, Roxine, Roxilius, and Luka watched a magic circle appear over the group and submerge them in a waterfall. Cayna and the rest were hidden by the thunderous torrent as the circle traveled downward. People and waterspout alike were squished into the ground until it broke apart and vanished.

“...”

Luka rushed over to the spot where the magic circle dispersed and stared with her mouth agape.

It was the first time she’d witnessed (what she assumed was) the spell that took them to that skeleton’s place (Opus’s tower).

“The water...”

“Fear not, Lady Luka. What you saw just now was only a bit of theatrics. The waterfall didn’t swallow anyone up.”

“...Really?”

“Yes.”

“Thank...goodness.”

Roxilius’s words set Luka at ease. Once Roxine saw Luka was smiling, she knelt down to meet her at eye level.

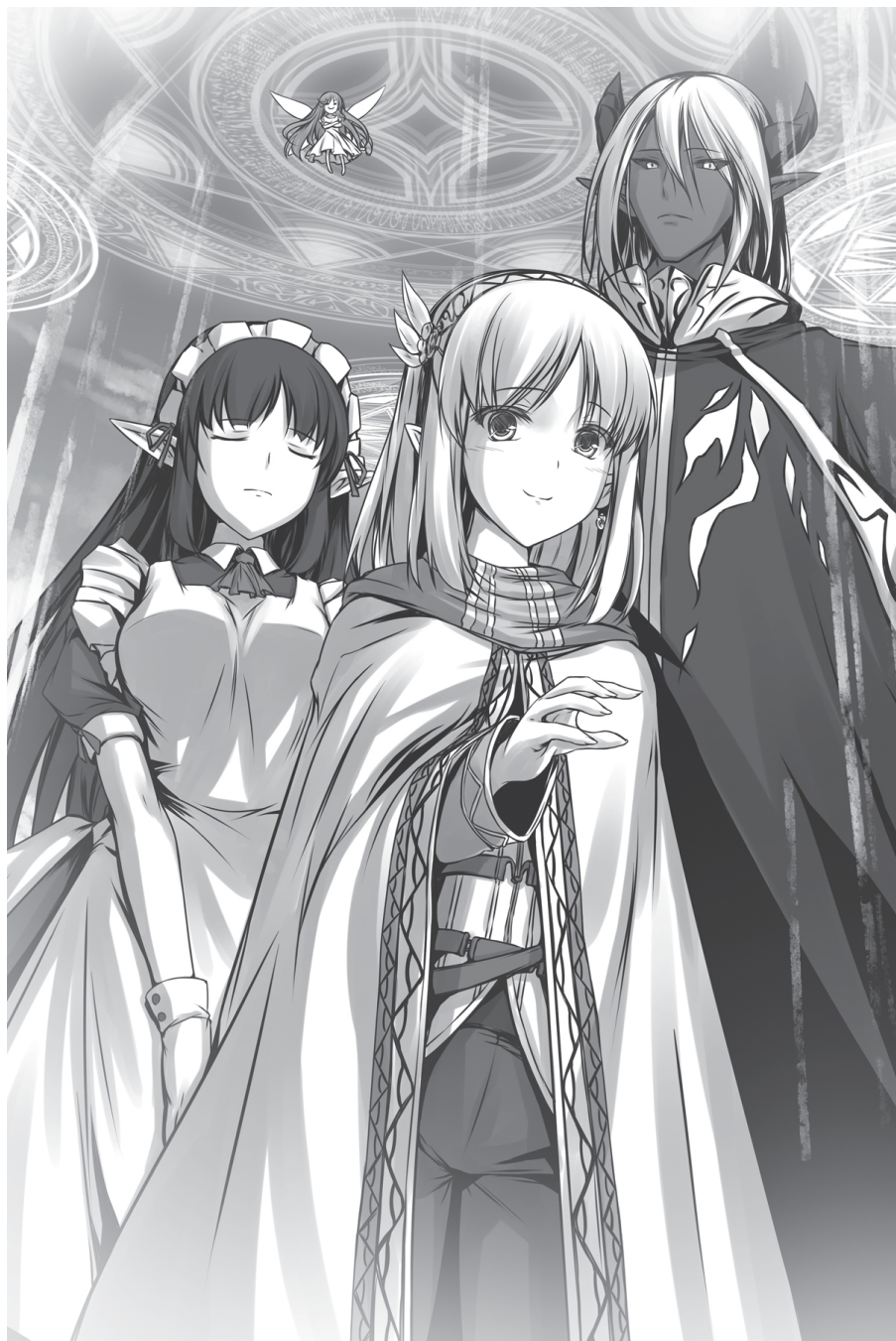
“What shall we do today? Would you care to practice your needlework?”

“Uh-huh... I’ll do...my best.”

Luka’s eyes sparkled with confidence, and she clenched her fists. Such a sight would make anyone smile.

Lately, cheerfully making cushions with the patterns Siren and Roxine provided had become part of her daily routine. Most of the finished products ended up in either the golem wagon or Cayna’s

living room. However, the best ones were sometimes sold (with Luka's permission) to Elineh's caravan when he stopped by the village. Roxine would sell these for a small fee and give the pocket money to Luka. Most of the products Cayna made with Craft Skills were woven from fine thread and yarn, so Elineh had his eye on unprocessed goods.



As soon as Cayna chanted the passcode, she, Opus, Siren, and Kuu were transported to the other side of the continent. This was so simple to do that some players back in the Game Era were skeptical about opening up long-distance teleportation magic to non-Skill Masters. Such criticisms mostly came from villages and town peddlers who feared their sales would plummet. The majority were disgruntled parties who failed to snag prime real estate in the capitals and caused trouble as a way to wear out their competitors.

The four landed in a watery area scattered with large leaves. Enormous lotus flowers in peach and white varieties floated around them, while many others appeared beneath the water's surface as well. This would have been a tranquil sight if only the blooms had been small and delicate; however, most were massive enough to comfortably fit around an adult. Furthermore, the stalks seemed to wriggle and dance on occasion.

The word "creepy" was apropos and certainly explained a lot. After all, the tower's former owner, Liothek, had a habit of collecting all things creepily cute. These ranged from items and summons to equipment. Cayna could still see her garish purple sea slug onesie and the ten-meter-long centipede she used as a steed. Liothek and Cayna had shared infamy for entirely different reasons.

"...Hey, it's not like Liothek was a bad person or anything," Cayna offered in the Skill Master's defense.

"Come to think of it, she would sometimes send out an Ugly-Cute Advisory," Opus added.

The two of them recalled Liothek sporting a smug grin in her onesie; the hilarious mental image sent them into hysterics.

"Greeetings and welllllcome."

As they shook with laughter, the Guardian enshrined on a particularly enormous leaf languidly called out to them. Cayna turned around to find a cow-sized tree frog, its bulging eyes silently staring at them. There was no question it *looked* like a tree frog, but its bright pink skin was definitely not something found in nature.

The amphibian's throat swelled as it croaked, and the creature narrowed its eyes as if awaiting a command.

"Sorry for barging in like this."

"Apologies."

Cayna's merry wave was offset by Opus's usual arrogance. He gave the Guardian a single sidelong glance, then furrowed his brow.

"What's with the bubble-eyed amphibian...?" he asked.

"Well, this is Liothek we're talking about," Cayna replied.

"No comment."

"Fighting means bubbles!" squealed Kuu.

"Uh, okay?" Cayna replied with a strained smile.

Siren stood to the diagonal right of Opus and reasserted her position as a neutral party. Kuu's energetic chant had even Cayna baffled.

The pink frog Guardian, not perturbed in the least, merely tilted its head.

"Bubbles! ♪ Bubbles! ♪"

"Umm, so..."

Kuu started gleefully twirling through the air, but Cayna quickly got down to brass tacks and spoke to the Guardian.

"This is the Item Box, right?"

Opus, who had come along as an observer, focused on an inner part of the tower to avoid eye contact with the Guardian. Siren only stood there in silence. She would act upon her or Opus's request, but for the time being, Cayna had to take matters into her own hands.

The object she pointed out to the frog was an especially small yellow bud in the center of a blossoming lotus.

"Yessss. Indeeeeeed."

The pink frog Guardian blinked its inner eyelids in agreement. Cayna moved between leaves toward the flower, and the petals opened upon her arrival. Then she peeked inside and found a ring-sized cavity.

"Yup, this is the ticket. Thanks."

"You're welllllcoooooome."

Cayna reached out and inserted the Guardian Ring. A loud *gooong* immediately rang out as a flower began rising from the water. Cayna frantically jumped aside and pulled her hand back.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa?!"

This happened to be the second time she'd made a fool of herself in this tower.

"Hmph."

A dresser-shaped Item Box arose alongside the flower and stalk. Its sudden appearance dazzled one individual in particular.

"It came splish-splashing out!"

Kuu clamored at this new surprise that had just emerged like a secret hideout. Opus looked at her and let out an exasperated sigh.

Cayna approached and opened her storeroom. She then linked the two and accessed the tower's Item Box.

"Hmph. I suppose there's truly nothing to be done without a Guardian Ring."

Opus, who had also approached while checking his own inventory display, nodded repeatedly.

“What’s up?”

“I was merely testing whether I could insert myself into the same connection.”

He’d apparently been curious to see if a Skill Master could freely access other towers. However, Opus had concluded that each tower’s specific ring was required to access its functions.

As soon as Cayna heard this, she agreed to the approval screen that appeared in her mind. Even so, this was never intentional; it just suddenly popped up. Though it lacked any rhyme or reason, she determined it was for the best, without any real proof.

“Hmm?”

Meanwhile, another window opened beside Opus. His jaw dropped, and Cayna glanced over at him with curiosity and surprise. Her double screen soon displayed the same information.

“Oh hey, it looks like you can check the storeroom now, too,” she announced with an air of admiration.

Opus cast her a dark look.

“What’s wrong?”

“What did you do just now to suddenly grant me access?”

“Huh? Even if you ask me... Umm, well...”

Cayna struggled to explain and finally decided to just share the bottom line.

“I said ‘Yes’ to an approval screen. What about it...?”

“Geez. You’re subconsciously learning to control the system. Well, no matter.”

“Wait. What?”

Opus ignored her question as he moved a finger across his own screen. His eyes darted back and forth and processed the information at a breathtaking pace.

Siren still stood at attention. Kuu, on the other hand, finally had had enough flying around and perched on Cayna’s shoulder.

“Jewels!” the fairy cried with sparkling eyes as she stared at the screen.

Cayna had expected Kuu to get riled up again, but her concern was needless.

Kuu quietly settled on Cayna’s shoulder, but a flurry of question marks flew around her head every whichway.

“They’re jewels, all right. Too bad there’s nothing else here, though...”

The Palace of the Dragon King’s storeroom was packed with gems.

“Catalysts for Simple Summons, I take it. Several appear to have already been sealed.”

“Makes sense. Liothek was always shouting, ‘I choose you, so-and-so!’”

Simple Summons was a cheaper version of Summoning Magic. Neither one was much different from the other, but a Simple Summons required users to seal a target in a jewel beforehand. Whatever was inside would appear as soon as it was thrown at one's feet.

The merit to this was the fact that it didn't require an incantation or consume MP when made in advance. However, the level of a sealed summons could drop, depending on jewel rank. For example, although Cayna was able to summon a level 480 Cerberus, its level might be nearly halved in a Simple Summons.

In addition, jewels could hold both summonses and spells and were considered a valuable item back in the Game Era. There was an unspoken agreement that everyone should have a chance to cast powerful magic, regardless of level.

Cayna had also created several jewels back in the day and used them to earn money. The collection in Liothek's storeroom was packed with unused jewels, a fair amount of prepared ones already sealed with Simple Summons, and a few left unpolished. She had apparently taken advantage of her location and struck a rich underwater vein.

"We didn't interact much. I couldn't understand her behavior."

"Her behavior..."

There were only thirteen Skill Masters, but it wasn't like everyone was one big happy family. As Opus had just mentioned, there were a few people even he avoided. Some Skill Masters only met at scheduled meetings or to exchange vital information. Cayna couldn't say much, since she also had a few names in mind.

"Darn. Guess this place is a dud, huh?"

"I always knew it'd be an uphill battle."

Cayna pouted at Opus's snarky comment.

"I'm still in charge of other towers, so just quit it, you naysayer."

"I am no such thing. It's merely fact."

"You seriously need to change your tune! Anyway, we'll drop by again!"

"Untilllll next tiillllime."

Cayna puffed out her cheeks and bid farewell to the pink frog before raising the next Guardian Ring high overhead. As she uttered the incantation, Kuu, Siren, and Opus (who looked like he had something to say) vanished from the Palace of the Dragon King.

Moments later, the quartet appeared in a semi-dome fifty meters in diameter. Green lines beneath them created a grid on the utilitarian floor. A blue sky and clouds were projected on the ceiling above them. At the very center, a floating, plush-like sun added a gentleness to the atmosphere.

In the middle of the room, a small maple tree sat in a pillar-shaped marble flowerpot. A human-shaped cloud of white smoke suddenly seeped out of it.

This hazy figure was the Guardian of the Battle Arena, one of the towers in the Felskeilo capital. It placed a hand to its chest and bowed reverently.

“Warmest greetings, Lady Cayna. How might I assist you today?”

“Hi there. It’s been a while. How’s your magic level? You got enough?”

“At present, I believe the amount you offered the other day shall safely sustain me for several years.”

“Really? That’s good to hear.”

Cayna regularly went around checking each tower and restoring MP whenever she had time, so it was looking as if even the towers outside her own would continue to operate without issue.

Just in case they weren’t already acquainted, she introduced her companions.

“Right, right. This is the Thirteenth Skill Master Opus, and the maid over here is Siren. Kuu is a family member.”

“Welcome all. There is little here, but do make yourselves at home.”

“Right. We’ll get going soon.”

Opus nodded pompously, and Siren silently bowed her head. Kuu, on the other hand, shouted “Hello!” and cut straight through the smoky Guardian’s body with a cackle. As if eager for more, she circled around at top speed and pierced it again like it was some sort of game. It was a bizarre sight, objectively speaking.

Cayna questioned the Guardian about the Item Box.

Replying **“If that is what you seek,”** it instructed her to face the plush sun and throw the Guardian Ring toward it.

“Throw it?! This thing?”

“Yes, as hard as you can.”

Cayna looked between the vaporous Guardian (which Kuu was still darting through), the ring, and the sun floating in front of the video projection. Despite her outright confusion, she gave a firm nod, cast Throw, Absolute Bullseye, and Macho Strength, then chucked the ring straight into the plush sun.

It was sucked into the very center, and after a beat, a high-pitched whistle echoed inside the dome. It sounded as if something had fallen a ways off. Not only that, several other noises followed in unison.

“I have a bad feeling about this...,” remarked Opus.

“Think maybe I overdid it a little?” asked Cayna.

A single bead of sweat dripped down Opus’s forehead. As Cayna tried to pinpoint the source of the noise, she turned around and realized what had fallen.

Several grid panels swiftly opened up to release thick, heavy-

looking pillars made of stone. They incessantly dropped from the latticework every whichway as three pale figures stared up in bewilderment. Oddly enough, however, one person in particular was gazing with keen interest.

“Kyaaaaaa?!”

“Ngh!”

“?!”

“Ooh?”

The trio immediately rushed to escape the stone deluge. Cayna cast Accelerate in the blink of an eye to glide across the floor out of harm’s way. Opus nimbly stepped aside to avoid anything that came too close. Siren approached the flowerpot that was the Guardian’s main body. The area around it was a safe zone, so this was the wisest course of action. Kuu, on the other hand, purposefully left this behind and danced around the crashing pillars like it was all a game. Unfortunately, her timing couldn’t have been worse.

The rain of monoliths only lasted for a few seconds, but to Cayna, it felt like a full minute of terror.

As soon as everything quieted and Cayna let out a sigh of relief, Sense Danger told her to bend backward. One pillar blasted from the wall and missed her chin by the narrowest of margins.

This seemed like the sort of nasty trick Opus would use to target her dropped guard.

Fearing a follow-up, Cayna anxiously stared at the jutting obelisk as it sank into the ground in front of her. Nevertheless, the sight next to the Guardian flowerpot was one she knew all too well. Cayna looked at the single Item Box and fell to the ground with a deep, deep sigh.

“Geez! What was *that* about?!” Cayna grumbled irritably.

Kee, however, offered no sympathy.

“You have my wall, so there was no need to dodge...”

“...Oh.”

Cayna was as strong as an elephant (even more so, really) yet she’d completely forgotten about Kee’s protection. She would have been perfectly fine without dodging even once. Still, she felt like scrambling out of harm’s way was a pretty natural reaction.

As Cayna continued to grouse, Opus clarified the situation with the smoky Guardian.

“So what was that?”

“A training attraction devised by Master Kyotaro.”

“An attraction?”

“Yes. He said the level of difficulty changes according to the speed and force of the ring’s trajectory.”

“I see.”

Opus’s steady gaze fell on Cayna.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha...”

Having caught this tidbit of news, Cayna soon realized what had happened with the pillars. Her face twitched, and she gave a dry laugh. As the one who used her skills to hurl the ring, she knew that the flurry of columns was obviously her fault.

Regardless, Kyotaro was definitely the type of oddball Skill Master who would require people to pass a training drill if they wanted to access his storeroom. But more importantly, Cayna shot the hazy Guardian a look that said, *If you knew that, you should've said so earlier.* The Guardian, whose concept of human emotion was negligible at best, only tilted its head.

Still sweating bullets under Opus's criticism, Cayna checked the Item Box and found, well, another dud.

“Gak. It's all swords...”

“Hmph. There are both double- and single-handed blades.”

“I guess Kyotaro was a sword collector.”

Opus took a peek as well, and some types had even him visibly shocked.

There was also defensive equipment to a certain extent, but the majority were swords. These included a Holy Warrior Soul Valhalla like the one she'd given Cohral and blades only dropped by specific monsters. Kyotaro had clearly been an avid collector.

“So what next?”

“Hmm. We could try Marvelia's place, but...”

The First Skill Master, the werecat Marvelia.

Also known as the Demonic Inspector and Stalker's Notebook, her white whale tower was presently anchored alongside the sandbar of Felskeilo's Ejidd River. The citizens had begun to revere it as a protective river deity, thanks to the ruse Cayna had pulled off with the help of the princess and knights. A mountain of flower offerings could still be seen on the altar by the sandbar.

Furthermore, Cayna had previously checked Marvelia's Item Box and confirmed it was mostly stuffed with documents and detailed notes on the game. The werecat had similarly interviewed Cayna and Opus to learn more about high elves and demons. However, even Cayna didn't know everything and soon tired of Marvelia's constant questions.

If even she was gone...

“Yeah, I wouldn't be too torn up.”

“Marvelia was a lot to handle, even for me. Question marks flew over her head during half of any given conversation.”

““Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha... *Siiigh...*””

Cayna and Opus burst into hollow laughter, and their shoulders simultaneously slumped. The very thought of those days gave both a

headache. Marvelia wasn't a bad person, just an annoying one.

"No point in thinking about people who aren't around! On to our next stop!"

"Yes, that's true. This will be the final one, right?"

As Cayna attempted to boost morale, Opus sighed and reminded her that this remaining tower was their last hope.

Actually, he wasn't too concerned. After all, it was supposed to be their final destination from the very start.

"The tortoise is the end of the line, right?"

"Yes. I gave you the ring, did I not?"

"Well, yeah. I have it, but..."

Cayna muttered, "The tortoise, huh?" as she switched out the rings.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, no, it's nothing. That's Kujo's place, right?"

"Correct."

The Second Skill Master, Kujo.

This short man in his distinct blue uniform and monocle was one of the more rational Skill Masters, yet there was an unearthly quality to him. He worked in manufacturing and didn't excel in combat, but Cayna had often been made to join in his hobbies and various expeditions throughout the game. He'd give her things like fishing gear and said, "This can give you peace in a dog-eat-dog world."

Collecting items was Kujo's pastime, and these ranged from the things any other player would consider junk to the rarest and most valuable auction finds. He had it all.

Since the single Item Box that came with his tower wasn't nearly enough, Kujo had paid microtransactions for the extra storage. Even so, Cayna remembered how he'd always complain about needing more. In that case, there was a good chance he had the projector she wanted.

If Opus was right, Cayna figured it had to be buried in there. Still, she also had a feeling that sifting through *Leadale's* largest item hoard to find what she needed would be a backbreaking endeavor.

"At any rate, let's go check it out."

She'd refrain from commenting until she saw things for herself. Cayna put on the ring, held it high overhead, and loudly repeated the chant for the umpteenth time that day.

The scenery went from a meshed blue sky to a portable backdrop of skyscrapers and a statue of a goddess. The group was instantly on its guard when a string of backstage cameras swiveled and zoomed in upon their arrival.

At the center of the studio, a golden Buddha sat in the lotus position on a lotus flower pedestal that hovered slightly above the floor. It moved silently through the air before stopping in front of Cayna and Opus. The Buddha's hands remained clasped together as it bowed deeply.

"Salutations, Master Opus. How may we be of service today?"

"We're looking for something and came by to see if you have it. Also, Cayna holds the ring to this tower now. She's the Third Skill Master. Sorry for the short notice."

"Why is your politeness so fake...? Ah, I'm sorry about this."

Cayna, already sick of watching Opus gloat like a corrupt magistrate, lightly bowed to the Buddha.

"We are pleased to make your acquaintance as well," it replied in a mutual gesture.

Sensing an endless cycle of pleasantries on the horizon, Opus stepped in.

"Come on. Let's get to work."

"Hey, don't pull me!"

"Please peruse at your leisure."

Opus pulled Cayna over to a corner of the stage where a door was clearly marked PERSONNEL ONLY. As soon as the ring unlocked the door, the demon waltzed in like he both knew and owned the place. Cayna followed him, peering around the room and ogling the scene before her.

"Wow, what is all this...?"

Enough spare Item Boxes to fill the floor of Cayna's own tower were piled up against the floor, ceiling, and walls here. There were around one hundred and fifty in total, and it was obvious Kujo had shelled out a significant amount of money. Such was the dedication of a collector.

"...Do we hafta check *all* of these?"

"Well, this will go faster if we divide and conquer. Besides, Kujo wasn't the type to just put things anywhere. Whether it be tools or magic items, I have no doubt each will be properly organized."

"Wait, you're saying you minded your own business?"

"I gave him the items, but Kujo put them away."

"That's not what I meeeant!" Cayna protested, but Opus completely ignored her. Although visibly dejected at first, she nodded and set out on her search mission upon receiving his clear instructions.

Since neither Siren nor Kuu could use the rings, they stayed out of the storeroom and waited patiently in the studio instead.

As Cayna took the back of the room and Opus handled the front, the pair used their Wall Walker and Float skills to reach the Item Boxes near the ceiling. Kee could decipher the contents without

reading over every little detail, so Cayna finished much sooner.

“...Mmm, this must be it.”

Opus had been slowly checking each individual box when he pulled out a rectangular stereo from the middle of the room. It had three round cavities in the center. There was no mistake; this was Cayna’s long-awaited projector.

“Yep, you nailed it. Thanks, Opus.”

“...You’d be much cuter if you were this honest more often...”

“Hmm? You say somethin’?”

“Not at all.”

Opus casually brushed her question aside. After all, he felt their complex relationship suited him well.

The Guardian and Siren, who had watched Cayna and Opus leave the storeroom victorious, bowed and offered their congratulations. Kuu was still flying around the set and didn’t even notice until Cayna called her name.

For the time being, the group headed outside. After all, the main rooms of most towers were impervious to magic. A Guardian would normally have to send them back outside if they wished to avoid any bizarre labyrinths, but since this tower’s facility was on the back on a giant tortoise, they simply had to leave the room.

“Wait a sec...”

When they finally left, Cayna noticed something strange.

The tortoise, a mobile tower, was stationary.

This was to be expected. Soon after the giant terrapin nearly crashed into the Otaloquess capital, it remained frozen at the quiz winners’ behest. A cluster of tree houses remained right in front of the tower’s nose, and if it had taken even one more step, the results would have been disastrous. The initial plan was to set the tortoise back on its original course, but Exis and Gramps were so preoccupied by their battle of wits that this never came to fruition.

“Hey! Why are you parked here?!”

Cayna charged back into the studio and lashed out at the lotus-seated Guardian. It avoided her threatening gaze for a moment but then suddenly seemed to remember something. It struck a fist against its palm.

“Come to think of it, we believe the victors’ sole command was ‘Stopppp!’”

“Ugh, what was Exis even thinking?!”

“Theeeerefore! As we were issued no further instruction, we have been rendered immobile!”

The Guardian’s rather nonchalant attitude reminded Cayna of something. She turned to Opus.

“You gave me the ring, right?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And you’re the one who ordered the tortoise to run wild, right?”

“Yes, I was.”

“...”

“...”

Opus watched Cayna swiftly and silently whip out her magic staff. He wasted no time prostrating himself right then and there.

“I apologize.”

“Instead of saying ‘sorry,’ don’t do that stuff to begin withhhh!”

When pressed for a motive, Opus readily confessed.

“I wanted to draw out more players.”

“Hmm. I agree it’d be ridiculously hard for anyone other than a player to pass the quiz. But even if you managed to track them down, then what?”

Thankfully, Opus’s plan had just barely panned out. Without Exis, the Otaloquess capital would have likely been trampled like a set in a monster movie and reduced to a ruin of rubble and bodies. For Cayna, it was all too clear she couldn’t ignore Opus’s blunder.

“No, I meant for it to stop at the last second,” Opus explained while sweating bullets.

“Is that true?” Cayna asked the Guardian.

The delinquent Buddha nodded repeatedly. Opus appeared to be telling the truth.

The gigantic, ancient tortoise tower was like an absurd magical machine that, with sufficient power, could run for eternity. The Skill Master controlled the tower, and the Guardian merely followed their commands. In other words, when all was said and done, the former ring bearer before Cayna was the real mastermind.

“At any rate, we’ve gotta move the tower somewhere else.”

“Hmph. Is that so?”

“It’ll cause trouble for the townspeople if we just leave it in front of the capital. People will get stressed out, wondering if it’ll ever move.”

“...Is that the main issue here?”

“Yes! It! Is!”

Cayna frowned in irritation. She yanked Opus’s shirt and gave him a good shake until he reluctantly said, “Okay, okay, I get it. Just let me go.”

The problem was moving this miniature mountain. If she used a spell that was too powerful, the Otaloquess queen was almost guaranteed to take notice of Cayna. And even that was likely part of Opus’s grand plan.

“Still, I doubt straight-up magic will lay a scratch on a tower...”

“True.”

Guardian Towers were built to challenge players and reward them with additional skills. This made them incredibly robust. In a meta

sort of way, they were like background scenery no amount of skill could destroy.

Cayna could probably manage it with the system inside of her, but she had little desire to test out a power far beyond her control.

“Hrm.”

After a moment of serious deliberation, she chose Allocate from her list of Magic Skills and set the tortoise beneath her feet under her domain. This was yet another skill that was basically useless after its debut quest, which involved saving an overly curious baby dragon from a dungeon. (Back in the game, this particular dragon was unattainable outside of Summoning Magic but sometimes appeared in quests, et cetera as an NPC.)

A note of caution: This hopelessly haphazard spell sent the user and any object 25 square meters or larger flying off in any random direction. After that, this notoriously annoying quest only ended once the baby was returned to its parents.

Incidentally, Cayna had been whisked from the Blue Kingdom to the neighboring Red Kingdom, so getting back had been no trouble. Opus, meanwhile, had been sent to the farthest corners of the Black Kingdom. The degree of nuisance depended on the individual, and this became a popular topic of conversation among players who completed the quest.

Her greatest concern here wasn't the distance but rather whether or not they'd wind up in a town or village. Back in the game, Cayna had peace of mind knowing such a thing would never happen, but the real world wasn't so forgiving.

She had pondered all this at length, but just as she cast Allocate over the tortoise, the spell anticlimactically dissolved.

“Darn, I knew it.”

Sparkly particles floated in the air like marine snow as curious townspeople began pointing at the tortoise and asking each other what was going on. Just as Cayna noticed the crowd and wondered if they should hide, a window of the castle suddenly creaked open slightly.

“Huh?”

A beautiful black-haired woman in a dress stood there, and for whatever reason, her eyes widened at the sight of Cayna.

“My dearest Aunt!” she cried.

Cayna tilted her head at this somehow familiar form of address. As she and the woman locked eyes, the newcomer threw open the window, jumped out, and rode the breeze down to Cayna's side.

“That's not Flight Magic, it's—Spirit Magic?!” Cayna cried.

The elegant young woman wore a flowy dress dyed in gradient purples. She had long hair, and one tuft of her bangs was blue.

Moreover, Cayna could tell she was a high elf. She couldn't explain why—maybe it was just another benefit of the system.

Only Kuu remained vigilant. She didn't bother hiding in Cayna's hair but instead flew over to Opus and disappeared behind him.

Cayna thought her reaction was odd but decided to let it go. After all, Kuu's sour moods always spelled trouble.

The woman landed delicately in front of Cayna and placed a graceful hand to her chest in greeting. Cayna winced at the pure reverence glittering within those golden eyes.

"It's been quite some time, dearest Aunt. About two centuries, I daresay."

She looked just like Cayna's adoring little sister figure in the high elf community who always used to shout, "*Big Sister, Big Sister!*" Cayna met this woman once before. She was a sub-character that accompanied the main player in order to level up; eventually, she was submitted to the Foster System. All she did was stand blankly behind Cayna's little sister, and people wondered if she was going to join her on quests dressed in such a billowy dress.

Yes, the name was...

"Um, Sahala...shade, was it?"

"Indeed, I am Sahalashade. 'Tis a pleasure to finally see you."

She smiled brightly, and Cayna was momentarily captivated. Her little sister had evidently put a great deal of time and effort into creating her daughter.

Opus cut in from behind Cayna.

"An acquaintance?" he asked.

When she quietly answered that the woman was a Foster Child of Sahana from the high elf community, he grimaced.

Cayna suddenly remembered how her little sister Sahana and Opus constantly bickered whenever they were in the same room. He obviously still wasn't a fan.

"Is this an acquaintance of yours?" Sahalashade asked Cayna.

"Uh, yeah. He's an awful friend I just can't seem to shake off."

"I see."

Cayna soon felt someone watching them and noticed a group of armed guards peeking out from the window Sahalashade had jumped from.

"Hey, Sahalashade."

"Yes? Whatever is the matter?"

"Are those guys okay?"

"Who? ...Oh my."

Cayna pointed at the window behind the queen, and Sahalashade grew a bit frazzled when she turned around. Hearing Cayna mumble "Oh shoot" finally made her reflect on her actions.

After all, it wasn't normal for a queen to jump out the window at the sight of a relative. Sahalashade turned back to Cayna with a look of discomfort.

"This encounter is surely some sort of fate. Now that we are finally together, shall we enjoy a spot of tea?"

"..."

Cayna was eager to avoid the trouble waiting for her on the other side of that window. The guards, meanwhile, were probably eager to use Cayna and her companions as an excuse to scold the queen. She sighed. This situation reminded her of someone.

"Sure, I'll join you."

"Oh, are you certain?"

"Why are you so surprised? You're the one who invited me. What about you, Opus?"

"I'll figure out a way to send that tortoise flying. Don't worry about me."

Opus shooed Cayna away, and she offered a strained smile in apology. They'd already found what they came for, so he was insisting she go enjoy a cup of tea. Cayna also felt obligated to atone after purposefully turning down an invitation delivered by the queen's personal emissary.

"...By the way, can I ask why a queen is jumping from windows?" Cayna said.

"Please forgive my disgraceful behavior. The very sight of you robbed me of my senses, dear Aunt. I feared that if I failed to invite you this time, there would never be another opportunity..."

From the window Sahalashade leaped from, the guards were giving Cayna the evil eye. She feared she'd be imposing on them for entirely different reasons. If Sahalashade kept them in line, all would be well. If not, Cayna decided she'd have no choice but to leave.

"Well then, let us be off," her niece said, facing the window. It was unclear whether she was aware of her aunt's feelings.

Sahalashade chided her protectors and forced them to stand down.

Still, it was the first time Cayna had ever heard *Unless you wish for you and your entire family to be wiped out, I suggest none of you challenge her.*

She wondered if she'd really been so notorious back in the Game Era but soon answered her own question. Based on the reaction of Sahana's daughter, she likely wasn't *too* terrible.

Probably. Perhaps.

The window Sahalashade had leaped from apparently belonged to an office. A sizable stack of documents sat on a sturdy desk, and there was a sofa and table as well. The tortoise's giant profile was visible

from the window, which Cayna didn't think made for the best view. She resolved to move it ASAP.

She could sense hostility from the other side of the wide double doors. As she contemplated how to clear up this misunderstanding, a commotion broke out in the hallway.

Based on the intermittent bursts of anger, one of their superiors had evidently come by and commanded the soldiers to stand down.

Once all was quiet, a maid waiting patiently in a corner of the room bowed politely. She treated their new intruder with respect and prepared tea as the queen instructed.

"Do have a seat, Aunt Cayna."

"Oh, sure."

Cayna took Sahalashade up on her offer and sat on the sofa. The maid placed a fragrant cup of tea before her and looked incredulous when thanked.

When Cayna casually picked up her teacup, Sahalashade sat across from her.

"I imagine the flavor must surely be inferior compared to ancient times," the queen said.

"No, no, it's delicious."

Cayna sipped the steamy orange beverage and found the notes were identical to real-life black tea. She wasn't exactly sure what "ancient tea" was supposed to taste like but gave her honest opinion.

Sahalashade smiled lightly, drank from her own cup, and relaxed her tense shoulders with a sigh.

All of a sudden, Cayna remembered that tea could slightly improve one's Mind stats (MND) back in the game. She used Search to check the contents of her cup but found nothing.

Cayna smiled awkwardly, aware of this bad habit of hers.

"Is the tea not to your liking, Aunt Cayna?" Sahalashade asked with mild confusion.

"No worries, I was just curious about something. Was that rude of me?"

"As long as you are enjoying the flavor, please act as you wish."

Only one cup of tea later, Sahalashade got to her feet. She smiled uncomfortably and started doing paperwork, with Cayna eyeing her.

"Um, am I interrupting?" Cayna asked.

"Not at all. I'm delighted to enjoy a short reprieve with company for once."

In other words, Sahalashade was bored of working alone in a silent room. As Cayna watched the queen quietly gather documents, she recalled a distant memory.

"Sahana avoided desk work, too."

"Oh my! Mother did? I never knew."

“I don’t have all the details, but she apparently had no problem walking long distances.”

Sahana used to visit Cayna’s tower frequently. Even two centuries later, she could still vividly remember when Sahana learned the skill to summon a Polychromatic Dragon.

Time continued to pass with only the sound of shuffling papers and the occasional exchange between niece and aunt. Cayna summarized her journey from the remote village to Felskeilo and the events that happened since while also answering Sahalashade’s questions.

Then, just as Cayna thought she shouldn’t overstay her welcome, a visitor arrived.

“Pardon me, Your Majesty. If I might discuss our recent reorganization efforts...”

The knight captain entered with a knock. He had the deep skin tone and long ears characteristic of a demon and only one distinct horn shooting up from the right side of his head. His hair was tightly slicked back, and a single glance made it obvious he was diligent and worked in an administrative capacity. Instead of armor, he wore a relaxed, long-sleeved soldier’s uniform.

He looked at Cayna and offered a slight bow before turning to Sahalashade. Cayna assumed the furious voice outside the door earlier had been his. Then, after several businesslike responses, he dropped a bomb on his way out the door.

“Hello, little lady. Are you a friend of Her Majesty?”

“Little...?!”

“Pfft! Hee-hee-hee-hee.”

Cayna stiffened at being treated like a child by a total stranger, and Sahalashade giggled at her subordinate’s harsh comment.

It was true that, compared to the queen’s mature air, Cayna appeared exceedingly young. Looking at the two, it was obvious who ought to be treated with seniority.

Cayna was used to being called “miss” or “lady” but never once expected “little lady.” The information failed to compute; she sat there pale with shock.

The knight captain hadn’t the slightest clue about the reason for their meeting or why his mistress was clutching her stomach in laughter. Cayna desperately wanted her tickled niece to clear up this misunderstanding, but her only hope fell into another fit of giggles.

“Your Majesty?”

“Sahalashade?”

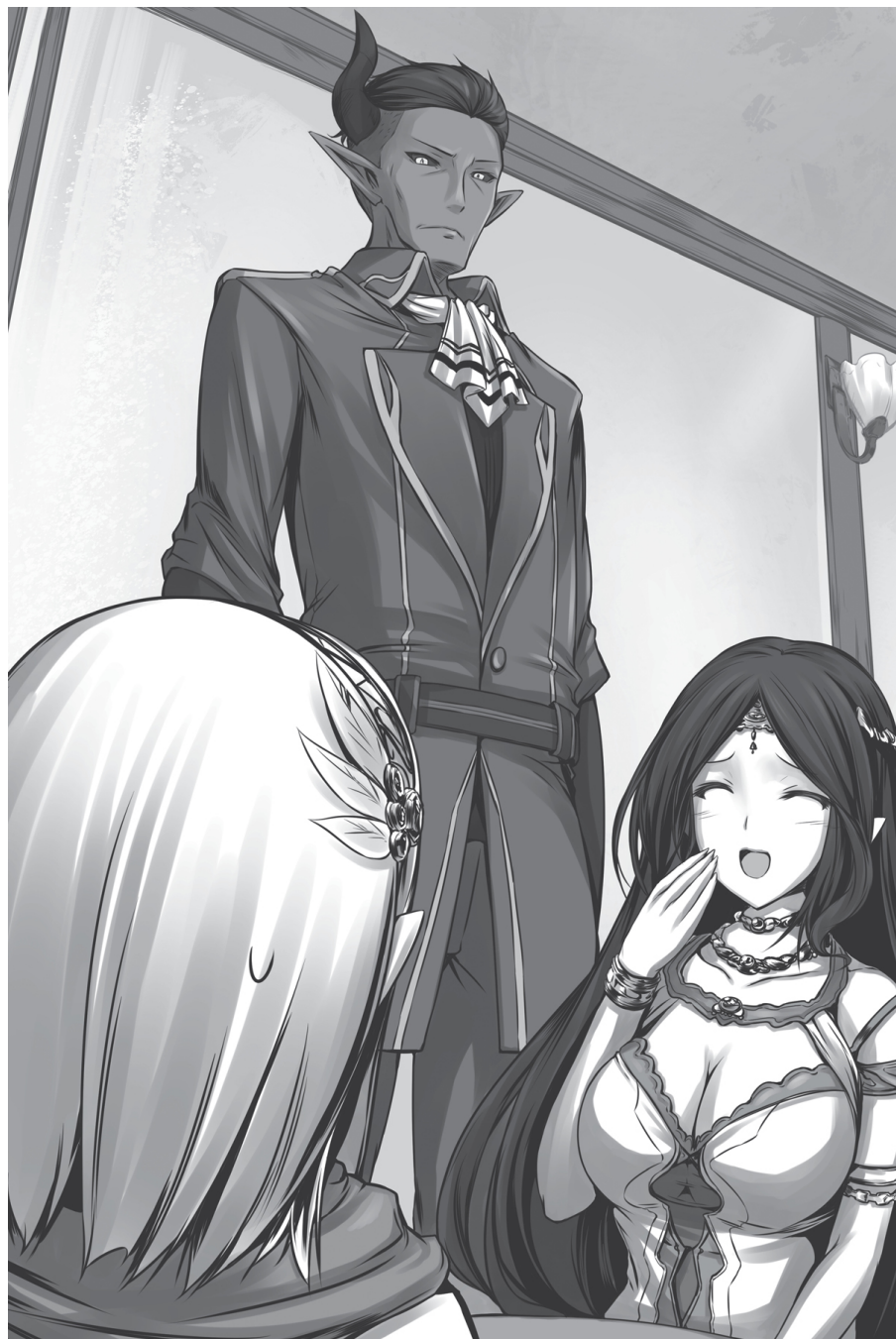
“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha... *Haaaah*. Phew. Forgive me, Guan Koh. This little l... Pfft! Hee-hee.”

“Uh, it’s whatever, I guess.”

If Cayna was going to be forever called “miss” and whatnot in this world, she might as well get used to it.

Cayna decided to wait in silence for Sahalashade to calm down. By the time her niece finally managed to catch her breath, she was thoroughly sulking.

Guan Koh had also come to realize his own comment was the reason for one side’s amusement and the other’s foul mood. The awkwardness in the room was palpable; he looked visibly concerned. Cayna felt bad for him, so she cast Intimidate to smother Sahalashade’s chortles.



“Hyah?!”

“How long do you plan on laughing?”

Cayna’s cold stare and icy smile made Sahalashade stiffen and compose herself.

“A-are you upset?” the queen asked with puppy-dog eyes.

Cayna dropped her grumpy act and shrugged. Sahalashade’s shoulders fell with relief, and she properly introduced her aunt to avoid poking the hornet’s nest further.

“Well then, Guan Koh. This is my dearest Aunt Cayna, who rejected our proposal to cooperate the other day.”

“You couldn’t phrase that any better?”

“And this is the knight captain of Otaloquess Kingdom, Guan Koh. He is also a Foster Child.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, wow... I’ve heard much about you from my father,” said Guan Koh.

“...‘Father’?”

Cayna had a terrible feeling and went on high alert.

This was apparently news to Sahalashade as well, and she was all ears.

“Yes, my father’s name is Guan Yu. He journeyed to the east over twenty years ago, and I haven’t heard from him since...”

The name made Cayna do a spit take.

“Wh...WHAAAAT?! Guan Yu was here?!”

Not only was the name familiar, but she knew the person all too well. She couldn’t believe the man’s name came up here, of all places, and took a good look at Guan Koh’s face.

“Can’t say I see the resemblance. Uh, sorry.”

“Actually, I get that quite often.”

Cayna quickly apologized for the verbal faux pas, but Guan Koh shook his head with a wry grin.

“Did you know Guan Koh’s father, Aunt Cayna?”

“Yeah, we met before. You know how it is.”

Cayna thought back to the Game Era as the memories came flooding back. Guys like him were best in small doses.

In a way, the player Guan Yu was a lot like an old man.

In the latter half of the Game Era, when Keina was still alive, they would often form temporary parties for various events and quests. Sometimes it was the two of them, and sometimes they’d join a group for a boss raid. Guan Yu, along with Kyotaro and several others, also took on the final quest and became a Limit Breaker. He was the one non-Cream Cheese member to do so.

As one might assume, his name came from *The Romance of the*

Three Kingdoms. He'd modded his avatar to look like an old Asian man in astounding detail and, for a variety of reasons, became famous as an oddball player.

The majority of players had Western facial features, so Cayna remembered how he stuck out like a sore thumb. Guan Yu was straightforward and honest and didn't sweat the small stuff. As someone who deeply valued justice, he came to the aid of the weak, put the strong in their place, and loathed inequality.

Cayna also recalled how his larger-than-life character conversely created a slew of problems.

"Still, twenty years, huh?" she said. "That wasn't too long ago. I've been meaning to get in touch."

"Oh, I have no doubt my heroic father is the same no matter where life takes him."

"So you say he traveled east. Perhaps he has crossed the mountain range?" Sahalashade offered.

"Yes, I suspect he has drilled his way through somehow. I hope he's doing well."

"Crossed the mountain range"? It's true there's one out that way, but...

Back in the game, the eastern mountains were a new map area waiting to be updated. Cohral never mentioned it, so Cayna figured the game must have ended service before it ever became available. Maybe her need for details was proof she was addicted to the game.

In this new reality where the mountain peaks stretched upward like the tip of a blade, players could in all likelihood still cross them with ease. The problem was whether Cayna's system extended beyond the mountains or if those who had never returned lost their abilities as players. Guan Yu's registered age was over thirty, so did he establish roots at his destination? Something might've killed him unless he was careful.

Cayna was obviously hesitant to say such a thing out loud and only nodded in agreement.

"Indeed. Even if your father has rushed into the mountains, I'm most certain he's crossed safely!" the queen said.

"How succinctly put. I do hope we can meet again in my lifetime."

"The east, huh? I could try making a highway out there when I have time."

According to Opus, those who settled down in Leadale had come from all over in pursuit of their dreams. In that case, there were likely other countries outside the region.

In the game, there were unfinished regions to the east that held nothing but monsters. If properly maintained, another nation could have easily been added.

After Guan Koh left in a good mood, silence temporarily returned to the room. Sahalashade instructed the maid to prepare more tea to give themselves privacy. After the maid bowed and left the room, the atmosphere tensed. Suddenly eager to escape the pressure, Cayna naturally sat up straight.

“Aunt Cayna, there is something I wish to ask before you leave. Do you mind?”

“A question? Sure, that’s fine. Just don’t throw me any curveballs.”

Cayna tried joking around to lighten the mood, but Sahalashade’s expression remained as solemn as ever. She prepared herself for whatever the queen had in store.

“It’s about the Abandoned Capital...”

“Ohhh, that.”

Come to think of it, Cayna forgot to ask Opus more about it after talking to Cohral. The overload of shocking revelations had completely wiped the subject from her mind.

Kee, you should’ve said something sooner.

“I was not given advance instruction.”

Ah, right. A thousand pardons.

“Sorry, but I don’t know anything, either. I’ll wring the info out of Opus next time and give you an update.”

“Opus? Who is he?”

“His name is Opuskettenshultheimer Crosstettbomber. He’s a literal demon and awful friend I can’t seem to get off my back. He was with me earlier.”

“Oh, him. So even you have friends, my dear Aunt.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean...?”

First her children, and now her niece—their less-than-glowing opinions of her made Cayna want to cry.

“That man...”

That man was presumably Opus. Sahalashade looked troubled. If anything, she seemed to be conflicted.

“You mean Opus? Have you two met before?”

From what Cayna could remember, Sahana had brought Sahalashade with her only one time. Sahana and Opus tended to butt heads, so Cayna made sure not to meet up with him whenever she was active in the high elf community.

“No, it’s merely my intuition.”

“Intuition?”

“I have a feeling he and I will not get along.”

“Pffft!”

Like mother like daughter.

More tickled than shocked, Cayna failed to contain her laughter.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Wait, why are you laughing?!”

“No, it’s noth—! Pfft! Heh, hee-hee-hee-hee.”

This was payback for Sahalashade’s earlier giggles, so now they were even. Cayna kept chuckling as the queen sulked and asked, “What? What did I say?”

“Phew, sorry about that. You’re just two peas in a pod.”

“I understand now. So Mother hated him as well. That is all I need to know.”

Cayna fully explained what set her off, but Sahalashade was still put out. Since Cayna wasn’t sure what else to say, she could only bow her head in apology. The queen wasn’t too upset, though. “I was simply being petulant,” she said. “Please forgive me.”

After chatting for a while longer, Cayna stood.

“Well, I better get going. You-know-who is waiting for me.”

In the far distance, Opus was atop the rim of the tortoise’s shell staring at her as if to say, *I worked something out, just like I said. Get back here.*

“He could’ve sent a message.”

“He was being considerate.”

“I guess miracles really do happen.”

Cayna said her good-byes to Sahalashade and opened the window, when her niece grabbed the edge of her cloak.

“U-um, Aunt Cayna? We’ll meet again, won’t we?” Sahalashade asked meekly.

“Sure. As long as I don’t interrupt your work.”

Cayna instinctively petted the queen’s head. She wondered if this was too forward, since this woman wasn’t her child, but Sahalashade didn’t seem to mind at all. She beamed.

“Yes! I shall be waiting for you.”

“Sounds like a plan. But I’m not climbing into any more windows.”

“Not to worry; I’ll inform the gatekeepers.”

Cayna left Sahalashade’s room unconvinced that informing the gatekeepers would make them any happier to see her.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Right.”

When Cayna reached Opus and looked behind her, Sahalashade was still waving. She briefly waved back, and the queen finally returned inside the castle.

“Is *everyone* you know some kind of elite?”

“Hey, I’m not the one who put a bunch of Foster Children in charge!”

This question had been puzzling Cayna as well, so she really had no right to give Opus a hard time.

"I don't understand it. Maybe the system inside you is interpreting data in a way that makes your life easier."

"What?! No way!"

Lightning struck behind her with a loud *crack!*

It wasn't completely impossible. Cayna started swaying from the shock.

"The system should not have such specific criteria."

"Bah. It could have been interesting if you just played along, Snake," said Opus.

Kee immediately ruled out this hypothesis, so Cayna suffered minimal damage. Once Opus let slip that he was pulling Cayna's leg, Cayna cast a sharp glare his way. And she wasn't the only one staring daggers at him—there was also the individual floating over Opus's head.

Struck by an ominous feeling, he slowly looked up and found Kuu coming straight at him with a crimson arrow.

"Gwaaah!"

Kuu sliced through the air at record speed and dropped the arrow on him, but he dodged. The projectile's upper half stuck into the tortoise's shell. It was unclear whether this was a benefit of the subsystem, but the power alone was terrifying.

"Kuu missed!" the fairy whined.

"Sheesh, Kuu, you're scary," said Cayna.

"My master had it coming to him, quite honestly," added Siren.

"Argh... *Ahem*. So as I was saying...", Opus began as he brushed off Siren's disapproval by switching topics.

"Hey, Kuu, why did you run away from Sahalashade earlier?" Cayna asked.

"Cause she's scary."

"Who? Sahalashade?"

"Uh-huh."

Kuu returned to Cayna and explained why she'd fled, but it didn't make much sense. Cayna had no idea what about the queen was the least bit scary. She'd spoken with Sahalashade at length, but aside from that last question about the Abandoned Capital, the queen didn't seem determined to pry. Otherwise, had Cayna simply been careless, Sahalashade might have gathered a wealth of information during the course of their conversation.

Even so, besides talk of relatives, the most Sahalashade could have gleaned were details about the players. She had no recollection of mentioning the system, so nothing directly involved Cayna.

"I'm telling you to listen," said Opus.

“Oh, sorry.”

While Cayna sank into thought as to why Kuu hated Sahalashade so much, Opus grabbed her head and turned it in his direction. She couldn't remember if he'd been trying to tell her anything in the first place, but she lent an ear once again.

“It's really not that difficult,” he said. “Just set up an Isolation Barrier, and I'll simply connect the domain to someplace else.”

“...That's it?”

“Yes, but the Isolation Barrier needs to be large enough to hold this giant tortoise. Can you do it?”

“We won't know until we try.” Cayna glanced around the shell, then walked over to the edge and eyeballed the estimated height. “We should be fine.”

She wasn't totally confident in her answer, but she felt like someone was giving her a mental thumbs-up. She went along with this feeling and brushed aside Opus's skeptical glance.

If anything, though, Cayna had to admit she could never manage it all on her own.

“Anyway—Kee, Kuu. I'm counting on you guys. I don't know where you're connecting this thing, Opus, but can you handle the size?”

“I'll be fine. Focus on your control.”

“Yeah, guess I might need that.”

Cayna took a deep breath and exchanged looks with Kuu on her shoulder.

“Ready when you are,” the fairy said with a smile.

Cayna nodded and closed her eyes as she expanded the massive Isolation Barrier that Kee had erected.

As Sahalashade glanced up through her castle window, she watched a spacious dome envelop the giant tortoise. Before she could even blink in surprise, the creature and barrier were gone.

It all happened so fast, but a commotion had apparently stirred up in the castle town and sent concerned citizens into confusion. Sahalashade didn't doubt Cayna's power, but neither did she expect such an instant solution.

“Inform the knights that what happened just now was the work of a trusted mage and will not affect the townspeople,” she instructed her maid.

Guan Koh would no doubt realize her intentions and send his subordinates to the castle town. She was treating her aunt like one of her own subjects, but Cayna would surely forgive her for trying to ease local anxieties.

Sahalashade looked over at the sofa Cayna had just been sitting on, and then turned to the collection of vials Cayna had left behind on

the table. They were filled with red liquid.

"By the way, I heard you have a lot of injured knights," she'd said.

"You're quite informed."

"Skargo told me after the attack in Felskeilo. I just made a whole bunch, so go ahead and take them."

The queen had picked one and gasped at the treasure in her hand. After all, a single vial could save at least four soldiers on the verge of death. Sahalashade and Guan Koh, who had both been Foster Children, knew this potion well. Two centuries prior, it had been an utterly average item that sold for 1,000 gil. After adjusting for inflation, it was currently a first-rate item worth well over 100 gold coins. Furthermore, the technique was lost in the modern era. Even a single vial found in a dungeon could be sold for outrageous prices.

This was the reason behind the misgivings Lopus had previously mentioned to Cayna. The ability to effortlessly gather such a priceless item was enough to shock even a queen.

Something else took Sahalashade by surprise. She had spoken with the High Priest Skargo countless times in her capacity as queen, and it turned out that he was Cayna's son. It came as quite a shock when Cayna revealed this; Sahalashade was accustomed to Skargo singing his mother's praises, but she didn't know he was referring to Cayna, since he'd never mentioned her by name.

That meant Sahalashade and Skargo were cousins.

"The next time we meet and the subject arises, I imagine I'll be able to hear more about Aunt Cayna from Sir Skargo," she said aloud to herself.

Sahalashade couldn't help but smile. Although she didn't know the whereabouts of her mother, Sahana, she was overjoyed to discover another relative and was eager to share this happiness with someone.

Nevertheless, she couldn't afford to simply celebrate; there was still much work to be done. She once again called in her maid, who gingerly collected the vials and took them to the castle medics. Sahalashade closed the curtains against her newly unobstructed view and took a single document from the pile that awaited her as she returned to work.

"Well, then. I suppose all I can do now is leave the rest up to Aunt Cayna..."

The queen earnestly hoped she would bring more news of the Abandoned Capital the next time they met.

There was a rumble and great tremor.

Together with the giant tortoise, Cayna's group landed in the middle of the mountains despite her previous concerns. It was forest, forest, and more forest as far as the eye could see.

The familiar-looking mountain ahead suggested they were near the eastern coastline. Nevertheless, no one knew the area well enough to pinpoint their precise location.

“So greeeeen!” Kuu shouted in excitement after taking a deep breath. “What is this place? Where’d we fly off to?”

Cayna removed the Isolation Barrier and blinked as her vision cleared. Nothing seemed to ring a bell. However, since she couldn’t see the Ejidd River from the direction instinct told her was north, it was pretty obvious they were nowhere near the remote village.

“Lady Cayna.”

“What is it, Siren?”

“Everything ought to become clear if you look down.”

“Down?”

Following Siren’s suggestion, Cayna glanced down from the edge of the tortoise’s shell and saw the layout of a familiar village. Most of the people had run outside in a state of panic and were now staring up alongside visiting adventurers. Their frantic, scattered movements made it clear the tortoise had caused a ruckus.

“Isn’t that the dungeon village?” Cayna asked. When she looked over at Opus, he had his arms crossed arrogantly and wore a self-satisfied look.

“This tortoise is a huge source of tourism for Otaloquess. Removing it from the country was out of the question, so this was our only option.”



“But did you have to park it so close?!”

The tortoise’s feet were only several meters from the wall surrounding the village. Furthermore, the delicate issue of how to painlessly move the Guardian from the capital had apparently gone ignored, since the force of the creature’s landing set off a minor earthquake anyway. Parts of the wall and several houses were askew.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what do we do?! Shouldn’t we help clean up?!”

“Lady Cayna, please calm down,” Siren urged, restraining Cayna as she darted around the shell.

“She’s right. Luckily, we’re invisible up here. No one has to know this was someone’s handiwork. We can just tell them the tortoise is a divine mystery sent from the heavens,” Opus said as he looked down below.

“Since when have *you* been the prepared type...?” Cayna asked.

Apparently, only his crafty ability to dodge responsibility had survived the Game Era.

“Anyways, there are a decent number of players in that village. I’m sure they’ll think of something.”

“Wait, really? I don’t remember seeing any.”

“That’s because, unlike myself, the name and face of the Silver Ring Witch are relatively well known. I suspect they’ve been hiding out of fear.”

“Gwah?!”

Cayna face-palmed as a corkscrew punch drilled deeper into her trauma and chipped away at her mental state. Her resentment toward the Admins was fathomless, thanks to that moniker and a certain viral video. The trouble she had joining random parties was one of the reasons she decided to hang around the remote village by herself.

Perhaps reading Cayna’s heart, Opus rounded everyone up, and they returned to the remote village.

After they left, the dungeon village was still wrapped in turmoil. Poor Jaegar was probably racking his brain and muttering to himself, “*Is this what Heimer meant by ‘lay some groundwork for what’s to come’?*”

CHAPTER 2

A Proposal, Wishful
Thinking, a Request,
and an Examiner

Several days after the Giant Tortoise Incident was (supposedly) resolved...

Cayna proposed her idea to Marelle and successfully set up the projector in the inn's dining hall.

She chose this location for two reasons. First, it was a popular gathering place among the villagers. Second, the dining hall had ample room. The projector had enough cavities for three sets of Eyes, so everyone could enjoy multiple simulcasts from each area. The projected images were about two by four meters.

The issue was where to place them.

The Pair of Eyes was creepy-looking, had no defense system, and couldn't determine what to film on its own.

Back in the game, Cayna used to hang out at her old guild base and watch other players livestream their quests from a fixed vantage point as she had just done. However, walking around town with a giant eyeball over your head in this world was a surefire way to get arrested.

And so, her best bet was to ensure that the job was secured within trusted locales and broadcast from there. Cayna then remembered the Guardian Towers.

Seeing as how the Guardian of Cayna's tower was stuck in the wall and had no limbs, one might wonder what giving it a Pair of Eyes would accomplish. However, the Guardian was omniscient within the tower itself and could project multiple surveillance videos around its Skill Master for a firsthand look at fresh challengers. Cayna thought she could use that function along with the Pair of Eyes to broadcast the surrounding scenery.

The mural Guardian wasn't on board at first and muttered, "**What? Me protect some weird eyeball?**" However, Kuu's terrifying smile that seemed to say, *You can't? Are you sure?* changed its mind in a

heartbeat.

She planned to leave one of the two remaining Eyes with the smoky Guardian of the Battle Arena. As luck would have it, there was an upcoming tourney that Cayna had been hoping to broadcast.

The Pair of Eyes couldn't transmit sounds on its own, but the projector circumvented this. However, the region currently being telecast around Cayna's tower was practically silent. A gust of wind blowing past the tower's peak or the occasional high-pitched cry of a passing bird were almost the only sounds to be heard.

The footage was broadcast in real time during the day as a matter of convenience, and Cayna was thrilled to witness the villagers' shared astonishment as they marveled at the tower's scenic views. If asked, most villagers would insist that such sights were a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Cayna tried looking for places even higher than the towers, but Hidden Ogre's floating garden seemed to be the only candidate. After all, even the three nations' capitals were modest compared to any cluster of skyscrapers.

Nevertheless, the wide-eyed villagers broke into huge smiles as they enjoyed a bird's-eye view of their little hamlet.

The people were smaller than a grain of rice from that height, but everyone clapped merrily and shouted things like, "That's my field!" and "I can see my house!"

Unsurprisingly, only lamplight illuminated the village after dark, so even the mural Guardian wasn't entirely sure where to focus next. Villagers who stopped by the dining hall for dinner could enjoy watching the sun dip beneath the horizon as the orange sky faded to navy blue. Once night fell, the small, faint lights of the village would dot the screen.

If it was neither daytime nor a shift in seasons, the timeless local forest and grand Ejidd River running through the woods north of the village were shown as well. Opus advised Cayna to avoid the fortress along the national border, so she said as much to the mural Guardian.

The edge of something fortress-like would sometimes appear as the Eyeball did a slow pan and caused the camera to suddenly face the sky. Cayna had to laugh at the mural's obvious panic.

Marelle told her some villagers would claim to have free time and stop by the dining hall during the day, but Cayna was relieved to hear this hadn't caused any major inconvenience.

"They order snacks and alcohol while they watch, so it's good for business," Marelle said from one side of the counter. "Still, I have a scary feelin' the womenfolk are gonna tighten their purse strings."

She smiled in exasperation while Luka and Lytt sat in front of her and stared at the projector. The two were captivated by the sights

initially, but several days later, they appeared to be looking for something. The girls at last came to Cayna, and just as she was wondering what their question might be, the two said they thought it was strange that the silver tower was nowhere in sight.

“Ah, that’s because the picture is being broadcast from the tower.”

“Oh...,” said Luka. “Wow.”

“Ooh, I get it now. Of course it didn’t disappear!” said Lytt.

That seemed to have been the big question on the girls’ minds; Cayna’s explanation had delighted them. The memory of hugging the girls tight was still fresh in her memory.

Since Marelle believed Cayna’s Guardian Tower was the home of the fearsome Silver Ring Witch, Cayna instructed the mural Guardian not to include it. It could have made an appearance, but she figured it was best not to upset anyone. In retrospect, she realized she should have mentioned this to Luka and Lytt as two of the few people who knew Cayna was the Silver Ring Witch.

“Cayna, isn’t there something else you should upgrade?” Opus asked with a frown.

“What’re you talking about?” she replied as she tossed a new barrel of whiskey into the storehouse. Luka was recording the storehouse’s inventory next to her but looked up at Opus with a mystified expression.

“Twelve!”

“Twelve...?”

Kuu peeked at Luka’s notes from the side and pointed out a mistake, which Luka promptly corrected. It was a charming scene. Roxilius had been tasked with managing their liquor business, but Luka was currently assisting him, since she had plenty of free time.

Marelle said it was normal for village children to shadow their mothers as they learned daily chores. However, as Cayna’s adoptive daughter, Luka had missed out on this tradition. The housework was split among the servants, and Mommy Cayna was always out adventuring, so she never had the chance to learn. Siren immediately addressed the situation after Marelle pointed this out, and the girl was presently learning basic cooking with her, Roxilius, and Roxine.

Roxilius had been the one to suggest involving Luka in the alcohol business as well, since he intended to eventually make her his assistant. Cayna heard this would allow Rox to focus on protecting the village while she and the others were away. Even so, it would be a long time before Luka could handle such responsibility.

“You know what I’m talking about,” said Opus. *“That.”*

“Oh.”

Opus forcefully pushed Cayna over to the caterpillar-tread water

well as if to say, *If you're going to follow the offline quest, then swap it out.*

"It's not in anyone's way. Can't we just leave it?"

"As usual, you decide everything on your own..., " Opus said with a sigh. His bitter expression indicated that he was at the end of his rope, and the demon stared emptily into the distance. "Well, I can't say there have been complaints."

"Wait, you already asked? Based on that reaction, I take it the villagers said they already have more than enough?"

"Everyone unanimously agreed that life has been very convenient."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha, I can only imagine what too much technology would do to them."

"They truly are a selfless people."

In Opus's opinion, their best option was to inundate the village with the same convenient amenities found in offline quests and turn it into a fortress. Nevertheless, modernization held no merit in this particular situation. After all, regardless of the system inside Cayna, there was no guarantee the village would truly evolve. Moreover, the people themselves had no incentive to find out. Cayna always took their desires into account, but forcefulness would breed animosity. Opus decided to drop the subject.

"Oh, but..." Cayna struck a fist against her palm when an idea occurred to her. Opus halted midstride. "Opus, you're talking about a bronze water pump, right?"

"Correct."

"In that case, can't we just draw up a blueprint and let an expert build and sell it?"

"An expert?" Opus asked quizzically.

Cayna grabbed his hand and headed back home.

First, she had Opus draw up a blueprint for a water pump. He had a skill called Tech Draft, so they didn't need any special tools. With parchment in front of him, Opus cast Tech Draft and sketched the plans in midair. This ability could take any item made even once and form a blueprint of it. The skill Transcribe could then put it to paper.

Back in the game, the finished item was nothing more than a picture of an item to hang in one's room.

By this point, there was no easier way to explain things to people. Cayna could have also used Tech Draft to explain the crawler-style well, but she'd completely forgotten about it at the time.

"There are *waaay* too many Throwaway Skills and pointless items."

"Hey, spare a thought for my tortured staff. Still, I'll admit it's not

something one should consider praiseworthy.”

Opus’s unfocused eyes swam with grief, and Cayna was paralyzed by an ominous foreboding.

He continued. “All was well initially, but as the list of skills grew, we would pick random words from the dictionary and then decide which ones to keep. However, this eventually got so out of hand that it left everyone brain-dead. No one was around to stop us, and a lot of the staff felt skills should be the game’s main identity. In the end, I took a few people aside and formed a separate division just for skills. The darkness that radiated from us night after night seemed to leak into the hallways—”

“All right! That’s enough! *Finito!*”

Cayna had no intention of going down that particular rabbit hole and cut Opus off with an air karate chop to clear the bad vibes. His dead fisheyes were hard to watch. In short, although the game had a near-infinite variety of skills, the staff also suffered horribly in the process. Whether Opus regretted this now was a moot point.

Afterward, Cayna told Luka and the Double Rs she would be heading to Felskeilo. Kuu would naturally come along, since she couldn’t leave Cayna’s side. However, Luka wasn’t inclined to visit the capital on a regular basis and chose to quietly stay home instead. Lytt declined for similar reasons.

Luka quickly grew flustered when Cayna teased her and put on a show of crocodile tears. “Won’t you come with me, Lu?” she begged. Note: Cayna conversely panicked when she dropped the act and Luka sullenly said, “I...hate you, Mommy Cayna,” upon realizing she’d been tricked.

The Double Rs’ relief was palpable when they heard Opus would be taking Siren along as well. The elven maid had apparently begun her own secret reign of terror within the household.

Cayna activated her Guardian Ring, and the group was soon on its way. Teleport would have sufficed, but a Skill Master like Opus had to be introduced to the Guardians. They flew to the First Skill Master’s Guardian Tower, the white whale. This decision was partly rooted in Cayna’s desire to see Opus’s reaction.

“Why,”—*ka-thunk*—“if it isn’t”—*ka-thunk*—“my master.”—*ka-thunk*—“What can”—*ka-thunk*—“I do for you”—*ka-thunk*—“today?”

Opus and Siren, first-timers at this tower, were thrown by the Guardian’s welcome. They stared dumbfounded at the little yellow bird Guardian attached to a bellows, rhythmically popping in and out of a large pendulum clock. Cayna hardly ever saw such an expression on Opus’s face and suddenly felt like she’d won something.

“Sorry, but we didn’t stop by for any real reason,” she said. “We

just needed a place to stop.”

“That is fine. I”—*ka-thunk*—“am a tool,”—*ka-thunk*—“after all.”—*ka-thunk*—“Being useful”—*ka-thunk*—“demonstrates my true value.”—*ka-thunk*.

Cayna admired the Guardian’s businesslike approach to its own worth, though she had to wonder if Marvelia had implemented this particular detail. Siren nodded as if she could completely understand the Guardian’s viewpoint.

Hold on, Cayna thought, don’t you have any issue with being treated like a tool?

Cayna was immediately concerned by Siren’s lack of self-worth, although Opus was to blame for creating her that way. Instead of a mere pointed rebuttal, she took things a step further and jabbed an elbow into his side.

“The young man you”—*ka-thunk*—“brought along has”—*ka-thunk*—“suddenly collapsed.”—*ka-thunk*—“Is he”—*ka-thunk*—“all right?”

“It’s just the usual. Nothing to worry about.”

Cayna’s response was cold as ice, but even the Guardian pretended to see nothing and fell silent.

As always, Siren eyed her master as one might a piece of trash. Their master-servant relationship sometimes felt like an inexplicable mystery. Outside of Siren (just barely) staying a step behind Opus, it seemed like their roles were reversed.

While supplying the seated wooden figure with MP, Cayna asked if it noticed anything different around the tower lately.

“There were”—*ka-thunk*—“a few minor events, but”—*ka-thunk*—“nothing significant.”—*ka-thunk*.

“Oh, really?”

“If I must”—*ka-thunk*—“say anything,”—*ka-thunk*—“it would be that”—*ka-thunk*—“the people have”—*ka-thunk*—“set altars upon”—*ka-thunk*—“the water.”—*ka-thunk*—“It seems like”—*ka-thunk*—“the area is”—*ka-thunk*—“being overrun”—*ka-thunk*—“with flowers.”—*ka-thunk*.

Live footage of the surrounding area dotted the Guardian’s room; a massive pile of cut flowers lay in front of the giant white whale just upstream of the sandbar. One might assume those on the bottom were all crushed, but apparently someone had recently preserved them with magic to create a wall of dried flowers.

“Devotion is great and all, but was this really necessary?”

At present, there was also a chain of rafts on the water that formed a temporary wharf and functioned as altars.

“These people have the oddest obsessions,” Opus said with a sigh, having recovered from his earlier ordeal.

“I have no”—*ka-thunk*—“intention to move, so”—*ka-thunk*—“I do not mind, but”—*ka-thunk*—“Master, shouldn’t I”—*ka-thunk*—“compensate them for”—*ka-thunk*—“treating me like”—*ka-thunk*—“a god?”—*ka-thunk*.

“Hmm. Maybe?”

When the loquacious Guardian put it that way, it had a point. Cayna began considering skills that might fit the bill.

However, Opus disapproved.

“A god mustn’t wield power so carelessly. As a higher being, you are to remain dignified. Compensating for something as frivolous as flowers will only weaken your authority.”

“...”

“Wh-why do you look so skeptical?”

“No, it’s not that. I’m just surprised. After all, you’re talking like you’re some superior being yourself. Got any experience?”

“Nonsense. If anyone is a supreme being, it’s your...”

“My what?”

“N-no, nothing. Forget it.”

He’d been about to say something extremely intriguing but stopped himself. Cayna circled him, and he avoided her gaze.

“Ohhh? How *veeeeeery* interesting. What’s this about me now?”

“Hush! No one likes a nosy brat!”

He was clearly avoiding the subject.

Even Kee couldn’t help her. If he’d had a physical body, there was no question he’d be shrugging in exasperation.

But surprisingly enough, it was Siren who stepped in.

“Well now, Lady Cayna. How shall we make our exit from such an exposed location?”

“Oh, right. No worries—I’ve got a place.”

Rings were normally used to enter a Guardian Tower, but there were multiple ways to leave them. In the case of Kujo’s tortoise, you simply left the TV studio and climbed all the way down. Players all had their methods, so escape wasn’t much of an issue.

For Liothek’s Dragon Palace, you needed a way back to land after being tossed into the water.

For Kyotaro’s Battle Arena, these days you needed to hide from the groundskeeper and sneak out of the stadium.

For Cayna’s and Opus’s towers, you were simply sent outside. There was no need to slink around, since both locations were pretty isolated.

However, Marvelia’s tower was on top of a whale and visible to all hopeful pilgrims.

The whale was considered a divine messenger these days, so they obviously couldn’t be caught mistreating it. Cayna had pondered if she could establish a remote exit and consulted with the Guardian. After a bit of experimentation, she realized she could leave from anywhere in the capital.

Despite the labyrinth of back alleys distant from the sandbar, few

places were safe from prying eyes. She thought their best bet was to rent a room somewhere long-term, and Skargo soon stepped in to lend a helping hand.

Cayna had consulted with her children on the matter back in town. Mai-Mai soon offered a room in her own home, but Kartatz quickly nixed this.

“Even if this is Mum we’re talkin’ about, won’t the other nobles get the wrong idea if an adventurer keeps leaving the house of a baron?”

“Oh, true. I want to help Mother, but...”

Although Mai-Mai was a noble, she still seemed to face a number of challenges. Cayna thought she could see cat ears droop from Mai-Mai’s head in disappointment, but it was probably just her imagination.

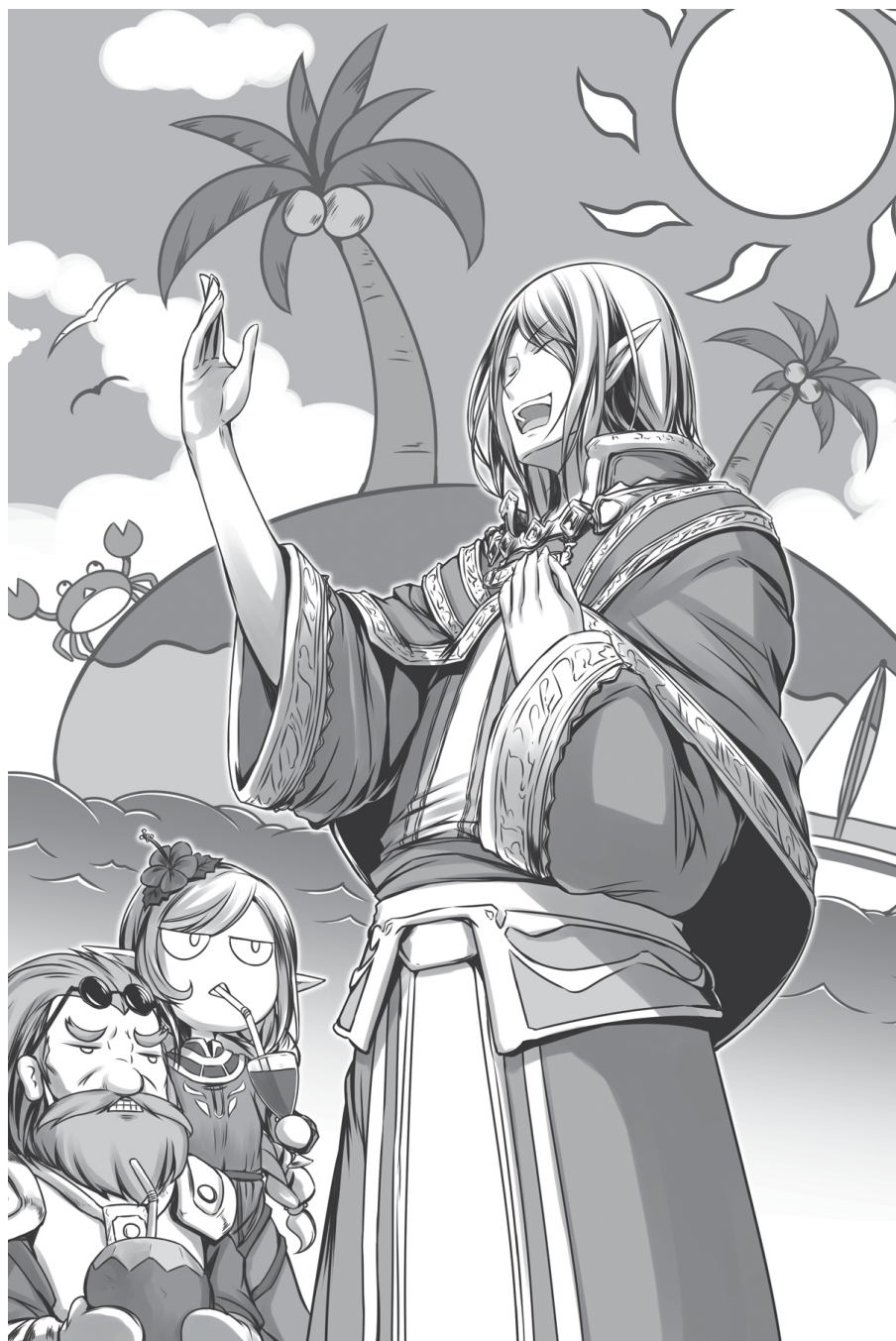
Then Skargo stood.

“Mother Dear! In that case, I shall gladly prepare you a room in the cathedral! It is near the Guardian Tower, and all our nuns and priests are well aware you are my beloved mother. It is a flawless proposal!”

“Good point, Skargo. You talk about Mum every chance you get, so I’m sure they’ll make an exception.”

There were a boatload of comments to be made here, and Kartatz’s visible exasperation made it clear he felt the same way. However, Cayna had a few complaints for the confident Skargo as the backdrop of a tropical island getaway appeared behind him.

One of them being his notorious mother complex.



Their meeting was adjourned, and some time later, Cayna was provided a room in the cathedral.

Cayna felt bad about getting something for nothing, so needless to say, she allowed the church to continue using it for various purposes. The room, a former storage space, was small and could hardly fit six people. Since the entire situation was merely pretext, Cayna loaned out a magical item in lieu of rent.

It was a metallic vessel in the shape of a water lily that required an abundance of magic rhymestones. Since the item was safe to use out in the modern world, Mai-Mai granted her permission.

It basically just produced one cup of holy water a day. Holy water wasn't terribly rare back in the game, but these days it was the envy of every clergy member. Even people like Skargo struggled to craft it. Cayna, on the other hand, could make a gallon at once.

His struggles were rooted in a difference of gender beyond his control. Since the Holy Water skill was designed for female players, it would take several times his MP to fill even a small dish. Cayna had no clue why, but Opus said this, too, was a result of a Dictionary Meeting.

"Anyway, please take us out of here."

"You seem"—*ka-thunk*—"a little tired,"—*ka-thunk*—"Master."—*ka-thunk*—"Are you"—*ka-thunk*—"all right?"

"Right as rain," she replied briefly.

Their surroundings instantly transformed, and they found themselves in a plain, cramped room.

"Is this the place?" Opus asked.

"Skargo wanted to offer me a palace, but fortunately I was able to stop him," Cayna replied, looking immensely relieved. She put a hand to her chest and let out a heavy sigh.

This didn't escape Opus's notice.

"You seem concerned."

"I mean, as soon as I open this door, it'll alert a certain someone."

"Hmph. Kuu will get him good!" Kuu started swinging her arm as if winding up for a punch.

"No one's 'getting' anybody," Cayna chided her.

Opus had already learned his lesson; despite her size, even two Skill Masters were no match against Kuu. He was the one who had paired her with Cayna, but he never could have imagined she'd end up being such a powerhouse.

Granted, Cayna is just as full of surprises, Opus thought.

Then Cayna steeled herself and opened the door to the hallway.

"Mother Dear!"

A sonorous voice rang out from the corridor, and Opus watched as

a figure in priestly robes collapsed to the carpeted floor on his knees.

“...What?”

“S-Skargo...”

Cayna winced. Behind her, even Siren was left speechless.

However, the strangest thing of all was how the clergy paid him no mind. At most, they would step to the side for the High Priest and bow their heads. It was impossible to tell in this bizarre situation whether they'd been corrupted or were simply numb to Skargo's antics.

The handsome elf stopped as a dust cloud effect kicked up behind him. Then he elegantly took Cayna's hand and kissed it.

She knew all along that Skargo would somehow realize when she left the room, but she'd hardly stepped outside. By his sudden appearance, Cayna could only assume he'd been lying in wait for her. The odd scene made even a long-lived demon like Opus feel that there were still some things in this world he couldn't comprehend.

“Ahhh. Any day in your presence is a blessed one, Mother Dear.”

A dazzling spotlight shone from the ceiling to illuminate Skargo and Cayna as countless sparkles swirled around them. An unseen angelic choir burst into song. Yes, it was indeed as if they were being blessed.

“Yeah. Wonderful.”

As her enraptured son turned to the heavens, Cayna emanated utter indifference. Part of her had jumped straight from exasperation to resignation.

Kuu took one look at Skargo and then collapsed on Cayna's head in frustration.

“No, wait, this can't be. To think someone would master Oscar—Roses Scatter with Beauty...,” Opus mused as yet another shock rattled him.

Skargo freely brandished Oscar—Roses Scatter with Beauty no matter how many times Cayna yelled at him, so she decided to just consider it part of his identity. If she made a comment every time he used it, it'd never end.

It was then that Skargo realized he had other company. He canceled the effect, rose to his feet gracefully, and put a hand to his chest with a bow.

“I see we have guests. My name is Skargo. I am the High Priest of this church.”

“No use trying to backtrack now. Unfortunately, that ship has long sailed.”

“My greeting just now was especially for you, Mother Dear. There is no issue,” Skargo replied, now acting like a respectable young man.

“Oh, there's plenty of issues. My nerves are shot,” Cayna quipped.

However, her inherently affable son didn't catch on at all.

"So who's this guy?" Opus asked.

"He's my Foster Child and son, the High Priest Skargo. He's turned into a weirdo in the two hundred years I've been gone," Cayna whispered back.

"How terrifying." He heaved another deep sigh.

After that, the group switched gears and headed farther into the cathedral. Not that they'd suddenly become religious; this was the only exit from the church grounds.

"I have some excellent tea brewing, Mother Dear. Would you care for a short respite?"

"Thanks, but we're just passing through on business."

"I see. That is unfortunate. Perhaps next time, then."

"?"

She expected him to insist on treating her to some famous sweets from such-and-such a place and double down on his invitation, so such a response was quite decent of him. It wasn't like they were in any rush. Skargo's attitude had her a bit concerned.

"You're not too busy with the church right now?" she asked him.

"M-Mother Dear!"

The moment Cayna said this, Skargo welled with emotion. Fighting back tears, the High Priest gripped his mother's hands tightly and drew close.

Shoot, now I've done it, she thought. If she had been an average (female) citizen who was weak to such charms, such proximity would leave her smitten in a heartbeat.

Seeing as this was Cayna's suggestion, she couldn't backtrack without digging for new info. Skargo's eccentricity aside, she'd proceed with the visit.

"I don't just mean the church. Are you busy, too?"

"Oh, um, you're curious about my schedule? I suppose not, as long as there are no injuries. We'll be dispatching medics to an event in short order."

"An event that causes a lot of injuries, huh? Sounds pretty dangerous."

"Of course, there is no reason for you to involve yourself, Mother Dear. In your eyes, such an event is mere child's play."

"What?"

"Child's play indeed," Opus—the only one in the loop besides Skargo—said with a nod.

"Opus, do you have any idea what he's talking about?"

"They're going to host a tourney," he replied, repeating what he'd heard from Exis back in Helshper.

There were no tourneys in the Game Era, so Cayna agreed with

Opus: If she entered one in this world, she'd have the competition all sewn up.

Of course, that was assuming no other players took part.

"A tourney, huh?" Cayna mused.

"That said, the tourney has played out in a similar manner for the past several years, and it seems many are hopeful that an impressive new challenger will emerge."

"A similar manner, you say?" Her curiosity piqued, Cayna looked over at Skargo as he started making small talk.

"Come to think of it," he said, "I suppose you wouldn't be familiar with this event. Isn't that right, Mother Dear?"

Skargo noticed Cayna had stopped in her tracks. He clapped his hands in realization.

Cayna's children believed she'd holed herself up in a forest to avoid people, when she'd actually been sound asleep inside a dungeon the entire time—not that she could just come out and say that, though.

"So what kind of tourney is this thing?" she asked Skargo.

"Simply put, it is a knockout competition. Its purpose is to determine the strongest fighter, but for those of us who know you and your acquaintances, it is nothing more than a game of pretend."

After all, Foster Children like Skargo personally knew several players.

"You know," said Cayna, "I bet you, Mai-Mai, and Kartatz would make an invincible team."

Considering that average modern-day adventurers hardly broke level 50, level-300 Skargo could sweep the competition entirely on his own.

"I sorely lack adequate battle skills, Mother Dear."

"At your level, punching and kicking would easily get the job done. Besides, I gave you the Wand skill, right? Plus you've got the bare minimum of Holy Magic, and then there's race-specific Spirit Magic. That's more than enough to take out a few hoodlums, right?"

When creating a character, each race had certain skills.

For instance, dragoids had the Robust skill, while werecats had the Lithe skill. Skills also varied depending on whether characters had wings or a tail. Both elves and high elves possessed Spirit Magic.

"Nothing escapes you, Mother Dear," Skargo said uncomfortably with a strained smile.

As their mother, Cayna was well aware of her children's capabilities. However, she had no idea if they'd learned anything new in these past two centuries.

"We're getting offtrack here. Weren't you asking about the tournament's system?"

Opus normally would have feigned ignorance and continued to quietly observe, but instead he interrupted, in the hopes of moving the conversation forward. Warning bells went off in Cayna's head.

"I'm surprised you even care, Opus."

"Well, events like this are usually a chance to gather local news. Shouldn't we at least hear the basic details?"

"...Is that really all?"

Opus ignored Cayna's contemptuous glare and left it up to Skargo to continue explaining.

"Yes, the tourney. I must have been overcome by Mother Dear's presence."

"Fine, just turn off that dappled sunlight effect and get on with it already."

Cayna couldn't stop herself from commenting on Skargo's eccentricities and completely missed Opus's point. Kuu nonetheless noticed his quiet chuckling.

"Ah, yes, where were we...? That's right, the tournament format. I believe it is a group competition this year."

"So you have individual tournaments, too?" Opus asked.

"Yes, but since one was held last year, this year will only be a team battle."

"Uh, what? Do you only have either an individual or team battle once a year or something?" Cayna chimed in.

"Precisely."

"But why? It makes no sense."

"Well, there are various reasons. A prime example is the loss of public order. Such issues also occur during our River Festival, but during the tourney, eager challengers from every nation gather here to demonstrate their abilities. This leads to excessive rowdiness and an endless stream of trivial quarrels throughout the capital."

"And that's why you don't hold each one in the same year?"

"In the worst of times, I personally had to rush about treating the injured. Ruffians invaded the church during my absence, took parishioners hostage, and barricaded themselves inside. It was quite the mess."

Skargo sounded like a tired old man recalling the past, and Cayna couldn't help but feel sorry for him. If only she'd woken up sooner, she could've helped.

"So what did you do with the scoundrels?" Opus asked.

"Mmm, you see, our spirited princess at the time offered herself in exchange for the hostages and stormed the church. She was always the very picture of heroism, so she beat the delinquents senseless and saved everyone."

""What?""

“The people welcomed her coronation with open arms. It was truly incredible.”

“Um, are you talking about one of Mye’s ancestors?”

“Yes. She was Princess Myleene’s great-grandmother.”

“Sheesh, the monarchy here is absolutely wild.”

Cayna was already familiar with two members of the royal family: a certain runaway princess who had once requested that Cayna be her bodyguard and a prince who was constantly sneaking out of the castle. Skargo’s anecdote proved that some things ran in families.

“I take it large, unruly crowds are no longer an issue?” Opus inquired.

“Yes, thanks to our preliminary round. To register for the tourney, you must first take on a quest from the Adventurers Guild. Failure to complete this will disqualify you from the final roster.”

“I see. So the preliminary is meant to filter people out.”

“I hear the mission is arduous, and only five or six teams pass each time.”

“Why’s it so strict? I wonder what the competition is like.”

“Forgive me, Mother Dear. That is the extent of my knowledge.”

Skargo must have heard everything from Shining Saber. Any info from someone charged with defending the capital couldn’t be an exaggeration.

“Actually, the knights are regular participants,” Skargo added.

“They can join a team tournament?!”

Specialists who excelled in both offense and defense wouldn’t pull their punches. Add in Shining Saber, and the tournament was as good as rigged. Either way, it was completely unacceptable.

“Hmm. You wouldn’t be asking me to stop those knights, right, Skargo?”

“Perish the thought. Besides, at least three people are required to join a team battle. Mother Dear, you’re not going to participate with two other Skill Masters, are you?”

“Of course not!”

If she wanted to do that, she’d have no choice but to contact Hidden Ogre, aka Gramps. She had absolutely no plans to participate, though, so any such dream team was mere fantasy.

Kuu patted the top of Cayna’s head from her perch, and she looked up. The fairy produced an arrow too small for anyone else to notice and pointed it at Opus. Cayna slowly glanced over and saw him grinning darkly. The alarms going off in her head convinced her to approach him; she had to be certain about something.

“Hey, Opus, got a second?”

“What is it?”

“I’ve just got this really bad feeling.”

“And how does that relate to me?”

“I’m probably way off base here, but you’re not *actually* thinking about entering the tourney, right?!”

Cayna hoped Opus was the type of Japanese person who could give an emphatic *no* (although he was no longer Japanese). She wanted him to deny it, just like he did so many other times back in the game.

“Yes, I’m considering it.”

“Are you *kidding* me?!”

Despite her wishes to the contrary, Cayna’s ominous foreboding was right on the mark. She pictured a horrific scene of untold tourney contestants collapsed in pools of blood. Cayna was convinced that Opus would show no mercy, just as he had during wars in the Game Era. Determined to save players and citizens alike before they could fall into his clutches, Cayna whipped out her magic staff.

It was her target, Opus, who stopped her.

“Wait! Wait, wait, wait, wait! Just hold on!” he shouted. “What’s with the random, insane hostility? What were you about to do?!”

When Cayna looked around, she saw a wide-eyed Skargo clinging to the wall; even Kuu was keeping her distance. Opus was covering Siren so Cayna couldn’t see her face.

Perhaps struck by guilt for terrifying them, Cayna’s heart twinged. The priests and nuns passing down the hallway had been knocked out by her murderous aura.

“Huh? What?”

It finally dawned on Cayna that this disastrous scene was her own doing. She’d just wanted to stop Opus but had clearly gone overboard.

“‘I messed up’ won’t cut it here. One minute you’re standing there frozen, the next you’re ready to kill. What the hell were you thinking?”

Opus grabbed her shoulders to prevent any sudden movements.

“Don’t I have to stop you?” she retorted with blunt sincerity.

“Me?!”

Anyone would be confused to find out they were the target all along. Shocked and exasperated in equal measure, Opus let go once he was certain Cayna’s rampage was under control.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Skargo. I guess I got a little heated. Is anyone else hur—?”

“No, you have nothing to apologize for, Mother Dear. Everyone makes mistakes. As long as it doesn’t happen again, there is no issue.”

The flustered Skargo rushed to comfort Cayna as her shoulders sank in dejection. The unconscious clergy were gradually transported away by those who had peeked in from the hallways to see what was going on.

“Please excuse me, Mother Dear. There is no need to worry. I will take responsibility for everyone and see to their well-being,” Skargo said, before leaving the sour-faced Opus and guilt-ridden Cayna behind.

“Still letting your overactive imagination run wild, I see.”

“*Sniff*. I’m sorry.”

“You assumed I’d join the tournament and go on a killing spree, didn’t you? I know you can’t treat players and nonplayers the same. There won’t be any bloodbaths, so just relax.”

As he pinpointed her fears, Cayna shrank into herself even further.

“When you came at me back in the game, the damage was minimal. However, if you mess up for even one second here, that mistake could hurt someone or worse. Be more aware of your surroundings and don’t jump the gun.”

“Right. I’m sorry...”

“You should keep a better eye on her, too, Kee. You’re the only one who can stop her if I’m not around.”

“I strengthened the barrier around her and weakened Intimidate.”

“Ngh. Sorry, Kee. Thanks.”

Cayna had never felt worse and wanted nothing more than to just crawl into a hole.

This sort of thing kept happening, yet it was her prime target, Opus, who dispelled her rage every time. Cayna had a feeling this recent string of revelations had left her emotionally shaken. She tried to control her temper, but Opus was constantly testing her limits.

As she left the church, Cayna gave an elderly nun all-purpose medicine. If anyone who fainted either drank it or had it poured on them, they’d make a full recovery. Unfortunately, even Opus couldn’t have predicted that everyone would go pale and black out after Skargo carelessly revealed its value.

“If you have nothing better to do, then work on controlling your emotions.”

Opus said no more and left. Siren accompanied him as a party member, but since all parties required at least three participants, he’d either have to summon something else or use another method.

“He was always logged in, so I’m sure Opus has the bells for a DLC servant or two...”

When she said this aloud, it made perfect sense. If Opus only ever summoned Siren, did that mean his other creations were cringeworthy in looks and personality? Cayna tried and failed to imagine what kind of obnoxious juvenile servant Opus might’ve come up with. She swore deep down that she’d do a bit of tinkering if she ever met one.

“How am I supposed to control my emotions anyway?”

“It is common practice to meditate or sit under a waterfall.”

“I’m pretty sure the Ejidd River’s waterfalls would crush me like a pancake.”

“My defense barrier will protect you from any immense pressure. Now that you are over level 1,100, you cannot be harmed so easily.”

“So I can outmatch nature now...?”

Cayna also had resistance against the heat and cold, so the elements were no issue. One look at her resistance stats made it clear outer space was practically the only place she couldn’t survive. The same was true of all Skill Masters.

“Let’s say I do sit under a waterfall— isn’t the Ejidd River pretty calm?”

“I believe there are rougher areas near the remote village.”

Perhaps it was a result of the game’s impact on the natural world, but there were rarely reports of flood damage along the Ejidd River due to heavy rains. The fish were plentiful, and the market had a wide variety of game and non-game species. There were several ferocious types that were known to attack humans, but none stood a chance against Cayna or any other player. Even the average citizen could handle them. That is, as long as chimeras like the alligator-shark from the other day didn’t show up.

“That alligator-shark wasn’t Opus’s handiwork, right?”

“We won’t know unless we ask.”

Apparently, even Kee didn’t know Opus well enough to answer.

“Can we deck him? Can we?”

“Kuu, let’s fix that short fuse of yours, too. Okay?”

“Okey doke,” the fairy replied innocently. It was unclear how well she’d actually listen.

Kuu, easily the biggest mystery of all, was duty-bound to support Cayna, yet she did so entirely of her own free will. A main-sub relationship like theirs would typically be rooted in subservience to one’s superior, but from what anyone could tell, Kuu didn’t feel the least bit of tragic heroism. Perhaps it was because Cayna herself didn’t have a good sense of the system, but she hesitated to treat the fairy like an assistant.

Opus, on the other hand, would no doubt boss her around.

“Kuu, do you have any special talents?”

“Oh? Hmmm.”

The fairy crossed her arms and fell into thought. Cayna was about to tell her not to overthink it when Kuu’s hand shot up.

“Eating! Playing! Sleeping!” she chirped.

“Y-yeah. You’ve always got a big, happy smile, Kuu.”

Cayna felt constantly pinned under the fairy’s boundless enthusiasm. She hadn’t been comfortable around the hyperactive children back in the hospital, either, so it was a familiar sensation.

Kuu’s cheer somehow multiplied further as she clung to Cayna’s cheek.

“You’re the bestest,” she said, rubbing their cheeks together. Warmth filled the elf’s heart.

Cayna’s careless mistake had sent her into a spiral of depression, but the fairy’s sincere affection finally managed to lift her spirits.

“Sigh. Thanks, Kuu.”

“Yep!”

Kuu and Cayna looked at each other and smiled. It was then that Cayna realized they were right in the middle of a busy street, and she glanced around to see if they’d become a spectacle. However, no one seemed to care.

“...They definitely should’ve noticed our embarrassing conversation.”

“Opus recently concealed you. Is there an issue?”

To be more accurate, Opus used his unique ability to isolate the group from its surroundings for only a short period of time. When Cayna took a closer look, the passersby were unknowingly skirting around them, and she couldn’t hear any outside noise. If she had to guess, this was the advanced Illusion Magic spell known as Detection Blocker.

However, Opus was constantly doing this sort of thing to her, and Cayna felt a wave of anger, embarrassment, and indignation. Her jumbled feelings threatened to take over, yet she also couldn’t help but feel a sense of gratitude.

In any case, just as Cayna was desperate for a way to vent her lingering frustrations, Kuu glowed blue. Moments later, Cayna felt completely refreshed.

“What the?!”

“Heh-heh!” Kuu sniffed triumphantly.

“Kuu, you can mimic the Tranquility spell?!”

“I thought I could, and I did!”

The effects Cayna felt appeared to be a product of Kuu’s intuition. Cayna was shocked by its resemblance to magic. The subsystem apparently had the freedom to act upon Kuu’s intentions and motivations.

“You’re amazing, Kuu.”

“Amazing? I’m amazing! Hooray!”

Once she realized she was being praised, Kuu started hopping around excitedly—an impressive feat in midair.

Soon afterward, they heard noises from outside, and Kuu retreated into Cayna's hair.

The middle-aged man who approached them with a load of luggage had been startled and wobbled dangerously. Cayna reached out to steady him, but his excessive thanks made her feel a little awkward. It wasn't like she felt no guilt at all.

A sense of culpability still lingered over Cayna as the man bowed repeatedly before disappearing into the crowd. Something odd occurred to her, so she spoke to Kee.

"Kee."

"Yes?"

"What's this connection ability Opus has? Is it magic? A skill?"

"..."

Kee seemed to be debating whether to answer. It was hard to tell, since he lacked a physical body, but based on his aura, Cayna imagined him standing there with his arms crossed and swaying from side to side.

"Strictly speaking, it is neither magic nor a skill."

"...Really?"

"Really."

An ability like that was downright inexplicable to someone like Cayna, who was basically living on a game board and boasted the best skills and magic.

"If anything, you should consider it a power similar to the game system within you."

"What?!"

The game system could manipulate the players to a certain extent—in the hands of a competent master, that is. If Opus possessed that same power, he'd rule with an iron fist.

"So he's, like, all-powerful?"

"Do you believe Opus acts in such a manner?"

"...I guess not?"

That's how Cayna felt, but she could still imagine Opus looking down on duped players with an arrogant laugh as he vanished into the darkness. After all, his actions were an infinite source of terror among players. In the end, however, she came to the conclusion that even if Opus *did* use his "connection" ability for a bit of trickery, he'd never use it to ensnare players.

"Besides, he insists on using it only for you."

"Wow, really? How about that."

Kee sounded confident enough, so it had to be true. At any rate, she decided to trust him and stop wondering about Opus. Her theory was *Have faith in the X that believes in X!*

Setting aside these complicated thoughts, Cayna returned to her next plan of action. There weren't many quiet places to meditate and calm her heart in the bustling capital, so she decided to do some adventuring.

"Might as well take on a request or two while I'm here."

It was the only idea that came to mind, but killing time and making money were more than enough incentive.

"Kuu will help, too!"

"Sure thing. Thanks, Kuu."

Kuu, who had been hiding in Cayna's hair to avoid attention, strongly approved. Cayna felt an extra spark of enthusiasm.

"But y'know...things feel a little unsettled, don't you think?"

Cayna and Kuu passed a number of armed people on their leisurely jaunt through town, some of whom radiated the air of a deranged horned bear. The regular citizens seemed to have caught on as well and openly avoided them.

Although the prerequisite Adventurers Guild request weeded people out of the main tournament, everyone still had to come to the capital to apply. There was no stopping Felskeilo's influx of ruffians.

The area around the guild was especially populated, since it was the only place in town to register for the tourney preliminary.

Most of the unruly fighters weren't exactly lookers, and each one wore the same grim expression. There was one slender man with softer features, but since he was just another face in the crowd of tough guys, it was safe to say he was no different.

Cayna figured it was best to lie low, since it felt like everyone had an ax or two to grind with her. Even the kid adventurers who hogged all the local missions were nowhere to be seen, likely scared away by this horde of scary men.

Cayna weaved her way through the crowd, and all attention fell on her the moment she entered the guild. Half stared at her, baffled and wondering what was going on with her; the other half were ogling her nastily.

She couldn't change her appearance, so her only option was to ignore the lousy lot. Curious if there was anything interesting, Cayna approached the request board, when someone called out to her from the reception desk.

"Oh! Caynaaa! What perfect timing!"

The voice was extremely familiar. Cayna got a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach, but she couldn't pretend not to hear. She reluctantly turned around and saw the guild employee Almanu waving to her. Since they met each time Cayna visited the guild, it was no exaggeration to say that Almanu was her go-to contact for all requests.



“What’s going on? She’s beaming, but I feel like a bear trap is waiting for me in the back room.”

“I must agree.”

“Um, I’m kinda scared.”

Kee and Cayna were on the same page. Almana, meanwhile, had already made eye contact. No longer able to pretend it was just her imagination, Cayna gave up and approached her.

“H-hey, Almana.”

“Hello there, Cayna. It’s been a while.”

Cayna grew nervous seeing Almana’s professional smile.

“Are you here to take on a request today?”

“You might say that. I was curious if anything interesting popped up.”

“So you’re saying you have free time? Is that correct?” Almana inquired, leaning forward with a devious expression.

Cayna winced at her own failure to seize the initiative. Although fifteen times older than Almana, she was a greenhorn in terms of life experience.

“Actually, I have a request I can only entrust to you. You’ll accept it, right? Everyone in the guild is already amazed by how you can take on an entire horde of bandits single-handedly.”

“Hold it, hold it!”

The very mention of this open secret meant Cayna couldn’t possibly refuse. All too late, she mourned allowing Tartarus/Exis to reveal her name. As usual, she lacked the skills to verbally challenge various adventurers and veteran guild staff alike.

“Well then, I’ll nominate you for the request and double the reward.”

“C’mon...”

Soon enough, Cayna was handed the request. Something about this felt extremely familiar.

“...Sniff.”

“You should give up and get it over with.”

“Fight, Cayna, fight!”

All her Divine Spirit and fairy could do was cheer her on before Almana led her to another room to discuss the details. The Deputy Guildmaster joined them.

“First of all, I would like to thank you for accepting our request,” he said, bowing his head.

“More like I was *forced* to accept,” Cayna muttered under her breath. The Deputy Guildmaster frowned.

She didn’t intend to complain; since the request was already underway, she’d follow it through to completion. Although Cayna

likely could have refused, she felt that alone was no excuse. Plus, Almana was an acquaintance; if the request had come from a random staff member, she would've said no in a heartbeat.

"Cayna? Might I continue?"

"Sure, go ahead. I won't know the game plan otherwise," she answered apathetically.

Almana and the Deputy Guildmaster felt let down. After all, based on her mumbled dissatisfaction moments earlier, they realized there was still a chance Cayna might change her mind.

"Um, we would like you to act as a temporary proctor. What do you think?" the deputy asked.

"A proctor? You mean for the tourney preliminaries?"

"Right. We also want you to fight the candidates and test their qualifications."

"So it's combat of all the things..."

If this was a request to fight, Cayna had to be cautious. After all, unlike a battle against tough players, brawling the people of this world would require as much delicacy as building a house of cards.

"The Adventurers Guild is asking this of you because we know about your hidden battle achievements," said Almana. "We promise not to tell anyone else, of course."

Somehow, the guild had taken note when Cayna wiped out the bandits in Helshper in her battle record; this incident was currently one of the guild's closest guarded secrets. She had assumed the story ended with her protecting Caerina and the other knights from the rock golems at the fortress and handing over Luvrogue, but Caerina must have used her connections (probably with Sakaiya) to report Cayna's success to the Adventurers Guild and make it a guild staff secret.

"Looks like things have gotten complicated."

"The implication appears to be that they are at their wit's end. I suggest we overcharge them."

Kee, oblivious to the plight of the negotiators, suggested the outrageous. A quiet "Nghhh" could be heard from within Cayna's hair. Kuu seemed upset about something, although Cayna wasn't sure if she was just reacting to the word *battle*.

No one knows what I have to deal with, Cayna thought with a strained smile. She took a sip of tea and prompted Almana to continue.

"Um, so you want me to mercilessly pummel one party in particular. Am I getting that right?"

"Correct. We understand our request is misguided, Miss Cayna, but no other guild member could possibly handle them."

"Isn't that basically fixing the game...?"

Cayna muttered her honest feelings as she gripped her head.

In short, their request went something like this:

Knock the party known as Viper's Belly into next week.

From what she'd heard, Viper's Belly was a group of infamous, conniving troublemakers who inconvenienced everyone around them. Although fellow adventurers, their *modus operandi* was gray bordering on black, and their considerable power made them unstoppable.

"Just on the border of evil, huh? That's some genius calculation."

The stories put a tired grimace on her face.

For instance, the group would often say things like, *We were attacked during a Forest Wolf hunt*, yet they would submit parts of other monsters they had defeated elsewhere earlier. Even if the guild tried to object, they couldn't investigate for fraud, since the "hunted" parts were already at least a day old.

Furthermore, despite a belongings pre-check, they had harmed participants and spectators alike after spreading poison and paralyzing power during a previous tourney. To make matters worse, although murder was strictly forbidden, the opponents struck by paralysis were sent to the brink of death. Everyone in the audience fainted as well, and the savage attack nearly turned the event into a bloodbath.

However, even when Viper's Belly's luggage was checked after the tournament, there wasn't a single suspicious item or dangerous weapon to be found. Cayna suspected they were hiding the evidence by using a special time-freezing item to store things away.

"An Item Box, maybe...?"

"They are most likely players. If that is the case, there is no need to hold back."

Kee's bloodlust aside, the goal of the request was to kick Viper's Belly out of the preliminaries. No more, no less.

"We must stand firm against shameless fools who dare to represent the Adventurers Guild!" the Deputy Guildmaster shouted with red-hot fury. He nearly burst a vein as he slammed his fist on the table.

Almana turned white as a sheet and trembled at the sight. Apparently, even the man who had explained their request with all the enthusiasm of a document review could contain himself no more and fell into an ogre-like rage.

"I w-wasn't expecting that," Cayna said.

"Ah, I am terribly sorry."

The deputy apologized for his lapse in judgment and helped Almana clean up the spilled tea.

Cayna nodded. "It's fine," she said. "I'll accept your request."

"What?!"

"R-really?!"

The pair's eyes went wide, and they stood with the cloth and tea set in hand. Almana's body language seemed to say, *Now that she gets it, I won't let her escape.*

Was that how badly she wanted this?

"A-are you certain?! You might perish!"

"Umm, would you like me to do this or not?"

The Deputy Guildmaster slammed both hands on the table and leaned forward to question the strength of Cayna's resolve. She understood their concerns, but she'd had enough of the twenty questions.

"I will proceed with our request. Also, Miss Cayna. We will begin immediately, but are you prepared?"

"Huh? So soon?"

"Yes. In truth, since our examiner hadn't arrived yet, we've been keeping them waiting. Those *unsavory* men you saw earlier were Viper's Belly."

"Ah."

Yes, she remembered the tough guys accompanied by a milder looking one at the entrance. It seemed that this meek man and his party were the problematic Viper's Belly.

Cayna would know which ones were players if she used Search. Were only some of them players, or was it the whole group? It'd remain a mystery until she checked; the thrill reminded her of using a *gacha* machine.

"The real question is how I'll break their spirits."

"Kuu will blow them to smithereens!"

"We'll definitely have casualties if you step in, Kuu. I'm begging you to sit this one out."

In her excitement, Kuu carelessly flew from Cayna's hair and made Almana drop her pen. Not only that, just as he was about to leave, the stunned Deputy Guildmaster froze with the tea set in his hands.

"Wh-wh-wha...?"

"A f-f-f-f-f-f-f-fairy?"

The legend of the fairies was apparently just as true in the big cities. Both looked at Kuu in utter amazement, and the fairy quickly retreated. Although shocked and motionless herself, Almana's eyes sparkled. This radiance soon stretched across her entire face.

Needless to say, the root cause was the folktale that said spotting a fairy will bring happiness. Cayna heard only children believed such tales, but it was probably different here in the city.

Cayna had no idea how this all started, but it was no doubt a nuisance for fairies everywhere. She personally didn't believe a single word. Back in the game, the rule with fairies was "*avoid at all costs!*"

and “*run away if you see one!*”

Fairies were supposed to be neutral NPCs, yet they did everything to antagonize the player. If you accidentally wandered into their territory, one would sweetly say, “*I’ll bless your armor,*” steal all your equipment, and throw you back out.

Cayna couldn’t relate, since high elves were the only ones fairies respected, but she was also indirectly inconvenienced. They would constantly give her equipment stripped from newbie players as gifts, and this became such an ongoing issue that false charges of high elf players using fairies to mug people began to crop up. Cayna had countless bitter memories of self-righteous players picking PvP fights with her.

“Cayna, that was...!”

“Yeah.”

All that aside, Almana implored Cayna with sparkling eyes and an expectant smile. Now that she’d actually seen Kuu, it was too late to insist that the fairy was just her imagination. Left with no other choice, Cayna tugged Kuu from her hair under the condition that Almana keep it a secret.

“Harumph.” Kuu remained petulant and puffed her cheeks in displeasure.

“You’re the one who dashed out, Kuu. It’s just for right now, so bear with it.”

There was really no helping it. The irritable fairy did a few laps around Almana and the Deputy Guildmaster.

“An honest-to-goodness Great Fairy...”

“Ohhhh...”

Almana, whose hands were clasped in prayer, was fine enough. However, the deputy’s large, tearful eyes were seriously off-putting.

Nevertheless, this was Kuu’s only intended appearance. When she instantaneously disappeared (although Cayna could still see her), the pair’s shoulders drooped with disappointment.

“Aww, the Great Fairy is gone. Still, now I’ll finally be able to get married!”

This was apparently something Almana had heard, but for someone like Cayna, who became a great-grandmother without even trying, it was an incomprehensible desire. Most women of marrying age would surely be appalled to hear such a thing.

When the trio finished their conversation and exited the room, the Deputy Guildmaster offered to accompany Cayna as a referee.

“I see. So where should I fight these guys? We’re not doing it in the Battle Arena, right?”

“We reserved a place in advance. It’s on the parade grounds outside the western gate,” Almana answered.

“Do be careful, Miss Cayna. Whatever happens, your life must come first.”

“Ah, right. Thanks, I’ll do my best.”

Cayna waved good-bye to Almana as she and her guide left the Adventurers Guild. It was some distance to the western gate, so they took a stagecoach through town. Cayna could have traveled faster over the rooftops if she’d been on her own. Someone else was with her, however, so she went along quietly.

Although technically a stagecoach, it was more like an uncovered wagon pulled by two donkeys with low wooden boxes on either side. According to the Deputy Guildmaster, there were several stagecoaches circling the capital, and the fare was one bronze coin.

“Whoa, that’s it?!”

“Ha-ha-ha, you can thank the nobles for that. Now even children can afford them.”

The stagecoaches around town were a collaboration between several noble families. Among these was the family of Mai-Mai’s husband, the Harveys.

There were also stagecoaches traveling along the highway that Cayna heard were run by the Adventurers Guild. Adventurers could double as guards, and the fare was cheap. However, it still cost at least ten silver coins.

The Deputy Guildmaster was surprisingly eloquent and an excellent conversationalist. He shared various anecdotes about the guild with Cayna until they finally arrived at the western gate.

“It feels kind of dangerous around here,” she said.

The western gate had a heavier air about it and stricter security than when she passed through it before.

“These are defense measures to prevent troublesome characters from entering the capital.”

“Gotcha.”

The Deputy Guildmaster’s expression was mixed, but Cayna simply nodded as she blocked the path of someone who just entered the city: a young man with a kind smile who looked like a peddler.

“Yes, miss? How can I help you?”

“You’re a merchant, right? What do you sell?”

“Nothing a lovely girl like yourself would need, unfortunately. I’m afraid I sell small accessories at most. Please excuse me.”

The man offered an innocent look of apology and quickly tried passing her, but Cayna bluntly called out, “How many wallets did you steal while waiting in line?”

The man, the nearby guards, and even the Deputy Guildmaster stared at her in shock.

“N-n-none. Why would you make such a false accusation, miss?”

Cayna ignored his firm protest as she swung her right arm down diagonally. Her fingertips sliced through the wind and left the man speechless. With the simultaneous rattle of coins, several leather wallets and stuffed bags rolled to the ground.

All around them, curious onlookers gaped in surprise. A single slice of Cayna's right arm had opened the man's inner pocket and revealed the fruits of his labors.

"Tch!"

It was impressive how fast he tried to make a run for it as soon as he realized the cards were against him. Unfortunately, his opponent wasn't in the mood. Kicked from below, the man sailed diagonally through the air as he spun like a top. In the blink of an eye, he struck the ground and splayed unconscious across the ground. The confused soldiers soon rushed over to apprehend the pathetic young man.

"Thank you for your assistance!"

"Don't sweat it. It was just a coincidence."

The soldiers lavished her with gratitude, but Cayna couldn't stand it. It really was a huge fluke. She was just curious about what would happen if she used Search on the crowd waiting in line. Who would've guessed a swindler and pickpocket was hanging out by the very front? The man himself was probably more confused than anyone else.

"Unlike when I find players, the display just now showed me people's jobs, titles, and backstory. What's that all about?"

"May I ask what you mean for reference?"

"One line had their name and level. I saw the man was a swindler, and a bonus comment said, 'Steals countless wallets on the side.'"

"I see. This appears to be more than a mere advantage of the game system."

As Kee spoke, the captain of the western gate said, "Please forgive the trouble, Miss Knight Captain Fiancée!"

Cayna did a spit take.

"I'd heard rumors," said the Deputy Guildmaster, "but is it true?"

It was scary enough that her rumored status as the knight captain's fiancée was common knowledge, thanks to a secret communication network. Did everyone look down on Shining Saber, or were they just worried for him?

At any rate, she'd start by clearing up the misunderstandings around her.

"Please don't believe every rumor you hear!"

"R-right... I understand now, so let go of my shoulders. I hear creaks and groans."

The pale Deputy Guildmaster acknowledged his error before guiding them to a very familiar place just beyond the western gate.

"Isn't this where Li'l P went wild when Felskeilo was under

attack?”

This area had been their final line of defense, and under the premise of keeping soldiers and adventurers at the ready, the forests on either side of the main road were cleared out and repurposed as training grounds. This way, they could effectively stare down people passing along the main road and defend the city if anything happened.

At present, stationed soldiers on one side were neck-deep in training. Across from them on the opposite side, five men were lazily sitting around.

“You sure kept us waiting.”

“Thought we’d be here all day.”

As the Deputy Guildmaster approached, a slim man with a wand staggered to his feet. His four companions were a bald human, a human with an eyepatch, a gray kobold, and a human with a mohawk stuck in the last century.

These five were the party known as Viper’s Belly.

Cayna’s Search confirmed four of the members were below level 40. The only player was the mohawked man with the outdated fashion sense. At just under level 100, he posed no threat.

“You’ll be fighting this girl for the preliminary round. If you win, you’ll qualify for the tournament,” the Deputy Guildmaster explained.

The party began whistling and clapping.

“We just gotta take down one little girl?!”



“You sayin’ we should go easy on her?”

“I think the Deputy Guildmaster is goin’ senile!”

“What’s the point of such an easy test?”

As four members of the group disparaged Cayna, it was the slim man with the wand who spoke harshly.

“Careful, folks. Rumors about that girl occasionally go around the pubs. They say she walked on water. Ordinary methods may not work.”

This silenced the others’ raucous laughter, and their easygoing air immediately shifted into battle mode. Each readied his weapon and scowled at Cayna.

Sheesh, it would’ve been easier if they underestimated me.

“You would have preferred a group of alpha males?”

Cayna had been thinking she could easily take the men down if only they’d continued to underestimate her. This was completely beyond her expectations, and she let out a sigh. After all, she never thought walking on water would’ve made her famous.

Cayna had been expecting a bunch of lowlifes based on what she’d heard so far, but their degree of self-control was surprising.

“What, this kid?” one asked.

“Doesn’t look it to me...”

Despite their skepticism, however, only Mohawk’s narrowed eyes popped open as he quickly retreated. He must have used Search as well only to be stunned when he couldn’t find anything. By this point, the one other person who could peruse Cayna’s stats was her equal, Opus.

Only her name and kingdom allegiance were visible at present, but few players would realize she was the Silver Ring Witch without being told so. It was pretty rich for someone around level 100 to try analyzing Cayna.

“Hey, what’s the matter?”

“This girl is trouble! She’s bad news, Boss!” the terrified Mohawk warned. It wasn’t like he knew her true identity, but there was no hiding his panic.

“Prepare for the worst! If we can’t pass this preliminary round, we can kiss those fun days good-bye,” their leader commanded.

““““R-right!””””

Roused by the quiet man’s rebuke, each member brandished his weapon of choice. Anyone caught in the chaos of previous tournaments would’ve liked to give these guys a piece of their mind.

If Cayna went easy on Viper’s Belly and let them pass the preliminaries, she couldn’t complete her guild request. On the other hand, she’d be changing more than the terrain if she got careless and

cast a lethal spell. It'd be inexcusable to torment them beyond even a broken heart.

She took out a twisted weapon from her Item Box. It was a sword with a fanged mouth across its blade. This was a Hungry Like the Wolf Sword just like the one Luvrogue wielded.

The moment she unsheathed it, the jaws clanked open and shut with an unsettling “Geh-geh-geh-geh-geh!” The incomprehensible Hungry Like the Wolf Sword was an event reward that fell into periodic silence and had the unique ability to devour any weapon that tried to challenge it. As a side note, the rare, moaning, laughing sword was number two on the list of most repulsive weapons. Number one was another noisy item known for obliterating enemy weapons—the Shut Yer Yap Shield.

The moment Cayna drew the Hungry Like the Wolf Sword, Mohawk turned white as a sheet.

“Damn it! This is what’s wrong with the Black Kingdom!”

Huh?

“Oh-ho. I see there is kingdom prejudice here, too.”

Cayna was thoroughly confused, but Kee appeared to be enjoying himself. It felt like he was smirking somehow.

She didn’t entirely get it, but back in the game, the Black Kingdom was everyone’s most loathed opponent during Battle Events. According to average players, it was inundated with untouchable Limit Breakers and weirdo guilds.

Aside from the small yet powerful all-Limit Breaker Cream Cheese guild, there was the Fuma Ninja Army guild, who enjoyed playing tricks on players and NPCs alike.

The Pink Pineapple guild was a band of perverts (including a single, cross-dressing, middle-aged man who ran an in-game bar) known for occasionally abducting handsome male players.

Other guilds had a longstanding reputation of accurately streaming the war situation in each nation while simultaneously filling smaller related events with seat warmers just to disrupt the whole scenario.

There were plenty of other kooky characters, but at any rate, it was an assembly of guilds who all had a quirk or two.

Every nation had the same issue at first, but these exiled outcasts gradually converged in the Black Kingdom. The Black Kingdom wasn’t entirely to blame, since everyone else resorted to expulsion in an effort to preserve their own dignity.

Opus was the commander of the misfits, and since the neighboring White and Purple Kingdoms suffered terribly after every Battle Event, this led most players to believe the Black Kingdom was a menace.

Mohawk must have been convinced of this as well. Together with

a string of curses, he insisted they avoid fighting.

“Seriously, this girl is trouble. Let’s back down.”

“What kind of fool are you? Our entire year of preparation will come to nothing if we do that.”

“It’s better than dying!”

“She’s just one opponent. Even a chance to make the first move would not save her. Prepare for battle. Is that understood?”

“*Sniff*. Y-yes...”

Did the mousey guy have something on Mohawk? Cayna got the impression this player was being bossed around by your average joe.

Although Cayna could hear her opponents, she was too preoccupied with figuring out how to fight without killing anyone. Kee recorded every word but planned to delete the conversation unless Cayna asked to review it.

It was one-on-five, and there were several meters between the two parties. Across the way, the soldiers paused their training and looked eager to watch the preliminary match.

“Listen up. If you lose, you’re disqualified. Killing is also grounds for disqualification. That means you, Viper’s Belly! Don’t get crazy!”

“It’ll be fine, Ref. She’s a girl, after all, and I’m always a proper gentleman. Especially in bed,” Slim replied.

His lustful gaze didn’t sway Cayna in the least. She had a tough skin, thanks to the nonstop wave of racy comments from guild members like Ebelope. Even her gaze remained steady. Slim eyed her dubiously.

“Begin!”

At the Deputy Guildmaster’s signal, the preliminary match commenced.

Meanwhile, a pleasant, familiar voice cried, “Do your best, Mother!”

Cayna instinctively looked back at the main road. Mai-Mai was waving wildly and threw her a wink.

“...What’s she doing here?” Cayna mumbled with surprise—and clearly leaving herself wide open.

The battle began with a great ball of fire.

“*Fireball!* Ha-ha-ha-ha! You’ll regret underestimating us!”

Slim’s veneer of chivalry fell as he sneered. The fireball flew straight at Cayna and swallowed her up in a violent explosion.

Despite her mother disappearing into a ball of flame, Mai-Mai remained calm and continued observing with a cheerful smile. As a shock wave rattled the area, the kobold threw two knives to deal the finishing blow.

“Tch, my weapon didn’t even get to see any action,” Patchy

grumbled as he stifled a yawn.

“That didn’t do nothin’!” Mohawk frantically yelled. He once again readied his large sword.

Cayna appeared from the smoke unharmed and tossed the two knives she’d been twirling in her right hand behind her.

“That it?” She asked with a tilt of the head and a confident smile.

“Shaaa!”

Patchy swung his enormous blade down on her, and Cayna countered it with the Hungry Like the Wolf Sword in her left hand.

“You’re wide open!”

Baldy materialized from the shadows of Patchy and thrust his blade toward Cayna’s stomach. However, an invisible wall several centimeters in front of her blocked the pointed tip.

“Wha?!”

“That’s impossible.”

Cayna held her right palm in front of Baldy. He looked up at her between those fingers, and his eyes bulged.

Magic Skill: Gluttony Gurgle

“Sleep.”

A black mist poured from her palm and enveloped Baldy. It quickly dissipated but left him collapsed on the ground.

““““?!””””

Three fighters gulped nervously at the sight.

“He’s just passed out!” Mohawk shouted.

Patchy soon returned to his senses and realized his opponent’s sword was making a bizarre noise.

Munch, munch, crunch, crunch.

Cayna’s blade was gnawing on his own giant sword, and cracks formed as it broke into tiny pieces. His enemy’s weapon seemed determined to leave nothing behind. It was more like a gluttonous monster than anything else.

Patchy rushed to put distance between them. A quarter of his weapon was already gone, so it wouldn’t do him much good.

“What the hell?!”

He couldn’t keep up with the madness. Whether it be her words or movements, Patchy wanted Mohawk to explain everything. However, even the player didn’t have all the details.

Expressionless, Cayna twirled Wolf Sword in her hand and pointed its tip at the kobold.

“You tried to shoot poison and paralysis into the air earlier, but that won’t work on me.”

Cayna was surrounded by Status Windows visible only to her. These monitored the local environment, and she’d already received multiple notifications: Poison Nullification activated and Paralysis Nullification

activated.

The rattled kobold hastily flailed his arms and hid a bag behind his back. His guilt was all too obvious.

His comrades clicked their tongues, and the frozen kobold began sweating like a waterfall. The Deputy Guildmaster shot a fierce look but refused to halt the match until a final outcome was decided.

“Damn it. How about this, then?!” Slim howled.

He produced a fireball one size larger than the last one, and it came flying at Cayna to swallow her up.

Magic Skill: Ice Arrow Liza

“Hyah!”

Cayna shot a pen-sized ice arrow directly at the fireball. Anyone except Cayna and Mai-Mai would have expected it to evaporate in a flash.

However, the ice arrow pierced the fireball and transformed it into a rain of sparks. Everyone’s eyes instantly turned to dots, and the flying ice arrow broke the befuddled mage’s wand after striking it head-on.

“Aghhh?!”

The others turned toward Slim’s anguished cry, and their own faces contorted with misery.

“You still wanna go?” Cayna asked, hands on her hips as she drove the four into a corner.

If anything, she was taking every precaution not to kill them. In terms of effective magic that would knock them right out, she could only think of Gluttony Gurgle. However, she could also put them to sleep with an instrument or win by dodging enough to wear them down. Or she could give them a taste of helplessness by breaking their arms and legs one by one.

...Yikes.

Cayna had a feeling she was slowly turning into Opus.

“““““No! It’s not over yet!”””””

Mohawk took out a Hungry Like the Wolf Sword just like Cayna’s, Slim cast magic without his wand, Patchy drew a short sword from his side, and the kobold wielded multiple knives.

Cayna let out a heavy sigh, not from exasperation but from resignation. She decided to cast her last resort.

Summoning Magic: Emperor Slime

A summoning circle two meters in diameter formed on the ground before Cayna, forcing Viper’s Belly to halt their charge and stumble in their tracks. Soon enough, a palm-sized pudding materialized from the circle. To be more precise, it was a slime that resembled a certain flower-shaped pudding and wore a crown on its head.

The party looked between the pudding, Cayna, and each other,

then burst into laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! “*That’s* her backup?!”

“Gwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! She ain’t givin’ us much credit!”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! What’s that little pip-squeak gonna do?!”

“Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha, I’ve got this! Just sit back and watch!”

As the kobold prepared to throw his knives, the Emperor Slime’s round sesame seed-like eyes turned to Cayna. She nodded and gave a single command: “Stomachache.”

The Emperor Slime immediately spewed the kobold in a golden fog, and he squeezed his eyes shut in dreaded anticipation. However, upon the realization that nothing was happening, he took a timid peek and patted himself all over.

Naturally, the three Viper’s Belly members who had previously fallen silent stared dazedly before bursting into another round of laughter.

That is, until they heard what sounded like thunder.

The battleground that once echoed with only men’s jeers was suddenly struck by an unnatural rumbling. Meanwhile, the kobold dropped his dual throwing knives and fell to the ground clutching his stomach.

“Wh-what’s wrong?!”

As his comrades raced over, the kobold broke out in a sweat. His tongue lolled from his open mouth.

“M-my stomach...h-hurts,” he moaned feebly.

Slim, Mohawk, and Patchy gasped in realization and turned to stare at the pudding responsible. Cayna, on the other hand, issued her next order to the Emperor Slime.

“Vomit.”

This time, all four were struck by an extreme nausea. It wasn’t like they’d been drinking or binge eating, yet a violent urge to puke welled up from the pits of their stomachs. Only the men’s pride and stubborn refusal to look pathetic just barely kept their lunches down.

“Hangover.”

In that same vein, an excruciating headache struck them like an alarm bell. Their ears rang endlessly as the nucleus of each brain radiated with unbearable pain. The men fell to the ground, claspng their mouths and heads, but this did nothing to ease their torment.

“You guys are more stubborn than I thought,” Cayna mumbled as she stared at the anguished Viper’s Belly.

In truth, groaning was all they could manage, thanks to the excruciating pain.

The Emperor Slime tried to hop up on Cayna’s left shoulder but scurried over to her right when Kuu poked out of Cayna’s hair and growled.

"Come on, Kuu. Don't be immature," Cayna chided.

"Booo."

Kuu sat and sulked on the left shoulder she'd just chased the Emperor Slime away from.

"H-hey, are they going to make it?"

The Deputy Guildmaster worriedly pointed to the unfortunate quintet. It was an odd question, given how much he hated them.

"I just hit them with a status ailment."

"Should they really be in this much pain?"

It was an agony only those who knew extreme nausea and killer hangovers could ever understand. The experience was pure hell if you didn't have any Pain Resistance skills.

"Well, I don't see how the battle can continue," the Deputy Guildmaster mumbled.

"M-Mother, what is that summons?" Mai-Mai asked with a grimace.

"It's a level-300 Emperor Slime. They're great at inflicting status ailments and know spells even players can't use."

They play dirty, though, she mentally added.

Back in the game, even Limit Breakers had trouble dealing with this type of monster, since Emperor Slimes lacked nullification skills and usually hung back behind an army of minions.

"Maybe I oughtta toss in two more."

Mai-Mai and the Deputy Guildmaster desperately clung to Cayna as she glared at the Viper's Belly punks whose faces had gone from pale to ghostly white. No matter how deep his hatred, the Deputy Guildmaster wasn't so despicable that he'd pour salt on the wound of a miserable, writhing enemy.

The way Cayna saw it, she just had to break their spirits until she struck down the root of the problem.

"Please, Mother! I beg you to stop this tyranny!"

"'Tyranny'? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Y-you win this battle. Release them already and collect your reward at the guild! I beg of you!"

"Why do I feel like the bad guy here?"

She ordered the Emperor Slime to release Viper's Belly, and their caterpillar-like squirming eased before finally coming to a complete stop. Foam poured from the putrid mouth of the first victim, the kobold with the stomachache. He was knocked out with his eyes rolled back.

Aside from a slight decrease in HP, all five were in fine health upon release from their status ailments. The trauma, however, was permanent.

The men sluggishly woke as Mai-Mai cast Simple Substance

Recovery Dewl on each one. The moment their skeptical gazes caught sight of Cayna, the kobold and Slim yelped and hightailed it straight out of the training grounds. No one even had time to react.

Needless to say, only Baldy woke up refreshed from his mid-battle nap. Mohawk and Patchy, on the other hand, fainted again.

“Sigh. I’ll take it from here. Go on ahead, Cayna.”

“I agree, Mother. Let’s head to the guild.”

As the Deputy Guildmaster pressed a hand to his forehead and Mai-Mai pushed her from behind, Cayna returned to Felskeilo.

Back at the Adventurers Guild, Cayna heard Viper’s Belly disbanded. But that’s a story for another time.

CHAPTER 3

A Registration Desk, a
Misunderstanding,
a Mother and Child,
and Preparations

Shortly before Cayna's savagery sent Viper's Belly into a tailspin of torment, Opus arrived at the tourney registration desk outside the eastern gate. Accompanied by Siren and wearing a black robe with gold accents, he cut an intimidating figure whose piercing gaze alone sent the small male receptionist sitting there into a trembling fit.

"H-hullo, this is the tourney regis... W-wait, sir! I swear I've done no wrong. Don't drag me away... Huh? That ain't it?"

For whatever reason, Opus's towering frame alone caused the man to mistake him for a micromanaging official.

"Whoa now, don't go scarin' me like that. I coulda sworn you were a noble, what with that servant and all."

"I heard this is the place to register for the tourney."

Felskeilo's eastern gate was pretty much the only thing in sight. Aside from a nearby gatekeeper occasionally checking the identity of a foot traveler or carriage, all was relatively quiet. Opus had expected an influx of tourney hopefuls, but just as he'd heard from Skargo earlier, no other participants were around.

"Y-yes, sir. This here is the registration area. I know there's not much turnout, but that's been the case every year. Records say folks haven't lined up for over a century."

"Hmph. So it seems."

"I bet you're feelin' let down, but I'm a proper soldier of this country. You came all this way to enter the tournament, right? Here, take a registration form. All you gotta do is submit your name."

Opus read over the form and noticed it asked only for the name of a party representative, the number of members, and a team name. Pretty sloppy, really.

"Might I ask a few questions?" Opus asked, hand on his chin.

"Sure, I'll answer what I can," the man said with an exaggerated nod.

“First of all, can a full mercenary group fight together at once?”

“Ah. Apologies, sir, but no can do.” The man dismissed Opus’s query with a wave of his hand. “Both sides gotta have at least the same number and no more. Unless you’re up against twenty mercenaries, they’re usually in groups of five or six.”

“I see. So we can’t surpass the smallest party.”

The minimum party rule was from the Game Era. The max number for a single party was six, and this too had apparently carried over into the modern world.

“I can enter solo, correct?”

“Oh, no, sir, you can’t go fightin’ a team tournament all on your own. There’s a three-person minimum—the sign over there says just as much. Wait. What? Is the young lady gonna join, too? Hey now, pittin’ your servants against those brutes is crazy talk. Why not mull it over some more?”

“I will be perfectly fine, but thank you for your concern,” Siren told the man with a light bow of her head. “This, too, is the duty of a servant. Please do not worry.”

The man fell silent and grimaced. He then frowned upon realizing something else.

“So you and your maid plan to enter? But aren’t you short one?”

“Our third member is busy right now, but we’ll meet up later.”

The man accepted Opus’s shoddy excuse without much of a fight. The city was packed in anticipation of the tourney, so he arbitrarily decided this third person could’ve been busy securing lodging or provisions.

“You oughtta quit while you’re ahead, before someone gets hurt or worse...but man, there are some real nutcases in this world. Me, I already quit while I was ahead. That way, I don’t got any regrets.”

“And yet, not quitting means you have to have a keen eye,” Opus pointed out.

The receptionist flinched. “So you know how it is. You’ve got a pretty keen eye yourself, eh, sir?”

“True, I don’t miss much. But no need to be so tense; I’m not going to reveal anything.”

“Phew, my life flashed before my eyes. You’ve got a terrifying aura, sir. You meet our criteria and then some. It’s just...”

“‘Just’? Just what?”

“Pretty sure most of the decent preliminary requests were taken already. I doubt you’ll finish in just a few days, but good luck.”

“And here I thought you’d be in charge of assignments as well. How disappointing.”

“Ah, I just send unqualified folk off to fake preliminaries. That’s over already, so no need to worry.”

Opus had no clue these “fake preliminaries” were the very thing Cayna would deal with later. An outrageous battle likely would have unfolded if he’d figured this out, but he was fortunate the small man had a keen eye.

“Here. Take this card to the Adventurers Guild. Like I said, there’s a preliminary test. Use that to get the guild to appoint you to a special request, and if you finish at least two days before the tourney starts, they’ll give you an emblem to participate. Bring that back here and you pass the test.”

“Two days before the tourney, you say? I wonder what sort of request can be accomplished in three days...”

“Only five days till the tournament. You got your work cut out for you, sir. Good luck.”

Opus was out of his mind to enter the tourney at the last minute. He’d been planning to hide the truth from Cayna all along, so he deserved whatever he had coming to him.

“At any rate, Master, what will we do about our third member?” Siren asked with a tired sigh as she and Opus headed to the Adventurers Guild. It was a natural question, since she couldn’t think of anyone else who might team up with them. “Don’t tell me you’re going to try and include Lady Cayna?”

“Look, no one in this entire world would stand a chance if we teamed up.”

Even on his own, Opus was already guaranteed victory, and that was what had Siren so exasperated. If he purposefully drew attention to himself, his future plans would alert players to his existence.

Most Cream Cheese guild members had a degree of fame within the game. Among these, the names and faces of Opus and sub-leader Ebelope were especially well known; Opus often served as commander in times of war and handled most livestreamed interviews. Ebelope was especially popular among male players, thanks to her famous figure and title as Sin City. Cayna, on the other hand, had been more involved in the high elf community rather than the guild. She might not have been so quickly outed as a Skill Master if she’d never used her Silver Ring.

There were a few players Opus was stubbornly targeting, though they were the exception rather than the rule.

Whether he liked it or not, he planned to use himself as a living billboard. To do this, he needed a place to attract the masses and spread his name beyond the tournament. Such an opportunity was rare in this era.

However, he also predicted that a certain percentage of the masses included resentful players who would fly at him in a rage.

But hey, everything would work out somehow. The issue at hand

was finding a third party member.

The quickest solution was to use Summoning Magic. However, the humanoid ones ran the gamut, and the rest were often grotesque. Opus was concerned the spectators might shirk in fear.

“I suppose it’s come to this...”

Opus looked at a certain thing he’d taken from his pocket, and Siren’s face contorted in shock.

“Hello, and welcome to the Adventurers Guild. How may I help you today? ...Ah, yes. I understand. You’d like a request for the team tourney preliminaries, correct? Right this way, then.”

Soon after speaking with the Adventurers Guild receptionist, three request documents were placed facedown in front of Opus for him to choose from. He immediately flipped over the one in the middle; its contents left the guild employee visibly stunned.

““Personal delivery for the manager of Sakaiya”? What’s this?” Opus asked as he read the objective with a puzzled head tilt.

“Ah, yes. Allow me to explain. Your mission is to retrieve an emblem from the owner of Sakaiya in Helshper to signify you have passed the preliminary examination.”

The employee’s apologetic expression only made Opus more confused. He had no clue why they were looking at him like that.

As far as the guild employee was concerned, even if a promising party did show up, it would be impossible to make a round trip to and from Helshper within three days of the tournament deadline. Moreover, arranging a personal meeting with the manager of Sakaiya was extremely difficult. Even if one had a sealed letter of introduction from an acquaintance and was fortunate enough to be approved for a private audience, it was common knowledge the process would take well over a month.

“Hmph. I’ll figure something out,” Opus mumbled. He ignored these concerns and left the guild.

Then, right after the dumbstruck employee saw him off...

“Can he really do it in three days?”

“...Hey, that demon didn’t exactly have a party with him. You think he’s doing this solo?”

“No way. You need at least three people to join the team tourney, and besides, he should’ve already been cleared by registration.”

“G-good point! He must have been representing the party! That lady behind him couldn’t have been a fighter!”

“...Is the maid going to join him in the tournament?”

“You can’t be serious!”

“Even if we pry into these adventurers’ lives, there’s very little we can do. At most we can offer suitable requests that have a high

survival rate... Granted, there are a few exceptions.”

“Ah, you mean Miss Cayna. I wonder why we haven’t seen her lately.”

“I heard she adopted a child, if you can believe it. Apparently she’s just settled down in some village.”

“You think maybe she found a nice husband for herself?”

“Who knows? Come on, let’s get back to work.”

“Ah, sorry. Hello, and welcome to the Adventurers Guild. How may I—?”

The guild employees who saw Opus off enjoyed some lively conversation but relegated him to a corner of their minds once they got back on the clock.

“Agh, my shoulders feel stiff for some reason.”

The morning after Opus registered for the preliminaries, Cayna yawned with a large stretch and rotated her shoulders.

“Well, Mother, did the bed suit you?”

“I’d say it felt strange more than anything else.”

Unfortunately, Cayna was most familiar with her hospital bed. Even her bed in the remote village was similarly firm, so she had trouble sleeping on the unfamiliar fluffiness of the bed in the baron family’s home

She yawned again, and Mai-Mai smiled tenderly.

What looked like a mother getting her sleepyhead daughter ready for the day was actually the opposite: The younger-looking Cayna was the mother, and the mature-looking Mai-Mai was the daughter.

“Thanks for letting me crash here, Mai-Mai.”

“Not at all. If you’re planning to stay in Felskeilo for the tourney, I’m more than happy to host.”

Cayna had been searching for lodging the previous day after finishing her job as a preliminary examiner, but even her usual places were booked. Just as she thought about heading back to the village, Mai-Mai invited her to the baron’s home.

“Still, is it really okay for you to put up an adventurer like me?” Cayna asked.

A while back, Kartatz had questioned whether an adventurer should visit a baron’s house. However, when Mai-Mai brought Cayna home and asked Lopus, the head of the household, he’d said, *“What? Feel bad if you want, but it doesn’t matter to me.”* Clearly, Kartatz’s concerns had been way off the mark.

His worries were further invalidated when Mai-Mai insisted, “What’s wrong with inviting Mother over?!” According to the Harvey family’s butler, nobles often hired famous adventurers to protect their homes, so no one would question their coming and going by this

point.

If anything, Cayna was a celebrity in her own right, even if she didn't realize it; she'd already met the royal family and knew both the princess and the knights. Mai-Mai's invitation was unexpected, but the Harvey family's household staff welcomed Cayna warmly: They pampered her with food, a bath, and a massage. Lopus's parents or Kartatz or Skargo were the only infrequent guests, so the staff felt underutilized.

"What are your plans today, Mother?"

"Hmm. I thought I'd pop by the tower, and..." Cayna started before turning to Mai-Mai. "Hey, Mai-Mai—everything good on your end?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you have to be at the Academy?"

"Oh, I appreciate your concern, but it's quite all right."

"Really?"

"Yes, we're closed during the tourney. The Academy has many aristocratic students, so it will be an issue of safety if the knights are overworked."

"You mean there's not enough knights? What's up with this country?"

"If anything, it's because our main force enters the tourney each year. Many also want to work security at the Battle Arena, and fights have broken out over open spots."

"...Sheesh."

The situation was apparently worse than Skargo said and prevalent among the knights. Their efforts would be in vain, however, since Opus planned to enter this year. It would all depend on the matchups, but Cayna feared he'd wipe the floor with everyone the second the games began.

Note that her actions the previous day did not fall into the same category.

"I wonder if things'll be okay."

"What things, pray tell?" came a *very* familiar voice.

"Well, I'm kind of worried Opus might heartlessly trample over everyone... Huh?"

Cayna was face to face with Opus, who had Siren right behind him. She was positive he'd used his connection abilities to somehow appear out of thin air. He really lived up to his bully reputation.

Cayna's train of thought came to a temporary halt. "Huh? Just now...?"

"What's wrong, Mother? Did this person do something to you?"

Mai-Mai pattered over to Cayna and hugged her tightly from behind, all the while pulling her in close like a protective mama bear

to keep her safe from Opus.

Cayna paid this no mind; her head was spinning with questions, for instance: How was she able to anticipate Opus's actions so accurately?

Theory 1: Opus was corrupting her. This was the most logical explanation, though Cayna herself found it hard to believe.

Theory 2: Opus had mentioned his plans earlier, and a burst of intuition struck her.

However, since that hunch was not thanks to the Intuition skill itself, Cayna couldn't pinpoint where such confidence actually came from.

Theory 3: She'd always known he was that kind of person, but the real question was when "always" began. Even Cayna no longer knew the answer, since she felt just as real as Keina. In a mere instant, the existence known as Cayna had been pulled apart and reconstructed by some pivotal factor. That was the best way she could explain herself.

"My head's a mess..."

"Mother?!"

A wave of nausea hit Cayna, and she covered her mouth. Mai-Mai gently patted her back; Opus grimaced as a pleasantness filled the air that continued until Cayna's queasiness abated.

"Hrm," she said. "The Purity spell works when you feel sick..."

"It only took one brief spell. Don't you feel guilty for worrying your daughter?" Opus asked, sparing a thought for Mai-Mai.

"Yeah. Sorry about that, Mai-Mai."

Cayna's daughter didn't recognize this demon acquaintance, and her knees wouldn't stop shaking.

"Oh, let me introduce you, Mai-Mai. This is my old, terrible friend, Opus. He's got a scary face and twisted personality, but he's not a bad guy."

"If I ever let you write my profile, I have a feeling it'd look like a Wanted poster..." Opus said, annoyed that she introduced his negative qualities first.

"He's a *genius* when it comes to messing around with people, though."

It was more or less complimentary. However, this was all it took for Mai-Mai's eyes to light up. Her fear dissolved as if it had all been an optical illusion, and she fixed her sparkling gaze on Opus.

"Mother."

"What's up?"

Mai-Mai gazed earnestly at the demon, her hands clasped in front of her like a lovelorn maiden. Cayna was struck with an ominous sense of dread.

"This man perfectly fits the description Skargo gave me. Could he

be our father?"

"Buh?!"

"Oh."

"Hah?"

"Ahhh."

"Ah."

There were five different reactions.

The first was from Cayna. Since the father she'd described to Skargo was based on Opus, it was only natural that Mai-Mai came to the same conclusion. However, the insinuation that Opus was Cayna's husband resulted in a backlash that would have been no less chilling in jest.

The next came from Kee, who had foreseen this scenario but unfortunately failed to keep Cayna from speaking.

The third reaction implied *Give me a damn break* and belonged to the very person who had inspired Cayna's fictional mystery man.

That was her own fault for forgetting how she'd described her children's father once before.

The fourth reaction was from Siren, who was relieved that she hadn't gotten caught in the crossfire.

Last but not least came Kuu, who didn't understand what was going on but hopped on the bandwagon anyway. She probably thought it was some kind of word game.

"No, that's not it! You've got it all wrong, Mai-Mai!"

"Really? But Skargo said that's what you told him, Mother."

The word *craaaap* flew around in Cayna's head. She remembered using Opus's exact image to describe their father to Skargo, but she'd never in a million years imagined something like this would happen.

Well, no amount of regret could take back those careless words. But perhaps there was a way to gloss over this awkward situation and fool Mai-Mai.

"Listen, Mai-Mai. If I married this guy, he'd turn you all into lab rats and have you on the operating table before the night's over!" she said, drawing closer to Mai-Mai and pointing a finger at Opus.

"Whaaat?!" Mai-Mai cried in a fluster.

"...Oh, come on," the accused said indignantly behind them.

"Lady Cayna, that analogy was quite... Pfft."

Siren tried to protest but couldn't get the words out. Upon closer inspection, her shoulders were trembling with laughter; Cayna had apparently hit a funny bone. Siren's giggling made Opus's expression sour even further.

"Cayna," he said icily. "I may be mild-mannered, but even I am capable of anger."

"Oops, sorry."

Cayna apologized for going overboard, although the problem was far from resolved.

The father of Cayna's Foster Children was the game system itself, so Cayna was now truly their parent in every sense of the word. And since the father of that system was essentially Opus, he was, in a way, their father as well. Mai-Mai already mistakenly believed that Cayna and the other Skill Masters were messengers of the ancients, so she'd be easily convinced that she was Opus's child.

That said, explaining the purpose of the sub-characters and Foster Children and everything that came with them would be a real struggle.

"Mother?"

"Sorry, Mai-Mai. Opus definitely isn't your father. Trust me on that if nothing else. Not that I can explain why, though."

"Mother..."

Opus looked at Mai-Mai's crestfallen expression and Cayna's drooped head. He murmured "Sheesh" and stepped forward.

If Opus wanted to accomplish his objective here, he couldn't leave the two of them depressed. He decided to yield just a little bit so that he could complete his request as painlessly as possible.

"You, Cayna's daughter—your father is my blood relative."

"What?!"

"Opus?!"

Both Mai-Mai and Cayna reeled, as if to say, *Where did that come from?*

It was an offhand lie; there was no mistake Opus was technically related to the system by blood.

He figured that saying Mai-Mai's father "*definitely existed*" would be more encouraging than "*We don't know anything about him,*" even if that meant sticking with the past tense.

Opus did, however, leave the "father's" race vague. He had no way of knowing every little detail of Cayna's invented backstory. Mai-Mai and her siblings would likely fill in the blanks later.

"I see. So would that make you my uncle, Sir Opus?"

"Uncle..."

In the end, Cayna had no choice but to reluctantly accept that Opus had become a relative. She *really* wasn't a fan.

"Like me, he has been a family member of sorts since the very beginning. I see no issue with keeping him around."

Needless to say, Kee's consolation had little effect.

"I don't think I'll get used to this until the shock wears off..."

Cayna didn't mind cohabiting with Opus initially, but as far as she was concerned, there was a world of difference between relatives and longtime friends.

Opus and Mai-Mai chatted amicably despite Cayna's visible despondency.

"Can you tell me more about Father, Uncle Opus?"

"He was an even greater prankster than me. His mischief couldn't be beat."

"My goodness! So that's what he was like, then. I must tell Skargo and Kartatz."

"...I...may have gotten ahead of myself..."

"? What was that just now?"

"Ah, nothing. Don't worry about it."

"I'd like to tell my brothers any information you have about our father. I do hope you'll tell me more about him soon, Uncle Opus."

"Yeah. Well, one of these days."

...Hey, Opus, aren't you digging your own grave here?

"This time, he is the one inventing a fictitious younger brother."

Cayna was relieved to clear up any misunderstandings, but now Mai-Mai was grilling Opus for details about a younger brother that didn't actually exist. She was simply curious and meant no harm.

Cayna tore at her hair when she realized they'd need to hammer out a consistent backstory. Opus tried to deal with Mai-Mai's persistent interest in her fake father, then turned back to Cayna.

"Ah, right. I have a favor to ask of you."

"A favor? From you? I smell trouble."

Cayna had long since realized Opus always approached her whenever he was up to something.

"No, my motives are innocent this time."

"Asking me for something that isn't a scheme? That's rare."

"Is it? I ask these sorts of things of you all the time."

"Hmm, I dunno..."

"...Pardon my intrusion, Lady Cayna. Master Opus would like you to write him a letter of introduction."

Siren watched her masters deliberate over the subject and stepped in once she realized they were getting nowhere.

"Like a referral letter? To who?"

Cayna considered who might need one from her. Otaloquess's Queen Sahalashade and Felskeilo's Princess Myleene immediately came to mind. There was also the knight captain Shining Saber, High Priest Skargo, Helshper knight instructor Caerina, and Sakaiya founder Caerick. Cayna's horror increased as she ran down the list of elites.

"It's for Sakaiya."

"For Caerick?!" Cayna and Mai-Mai shouted in unison.

They hadn't expected that name to come up. Cayna didn't believe Opus had any use for merchants.

“No, Master Opus is not acquainting himself with merchants now of all times,” Siren said, confirming Cayna’s thoughts.

“In order to pass the tourney preliminary, I have to head to Sakaiya.”

“I knew it—you really are entering.” Cayna acquiesced, exhausted.

“Hmm? Are you going to join the tourney, Uncle Opus?” Mai-Mai looked shocked. “Mother, is he...?”

“Yeah, he’s a Skill Master like me.”

“...We’re all doomed, aren’t we?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll deck Opus before he even has the chance to pull anything.”

Mother and daughter were both savagely mistrusting.

“Hey, Cayna. If you’re going to talk about me behind my back, at least wait until I’m not around. How about showing me a bit more respect?”

“I mean, I know I’m not really one to talk, but you’ve got enough examples of bad behavior to fill a whole book.”

As usual, Opus gave up trying to explain his screwups, since it was pointless to complain. He had a feeling she’d make up some reason to deck him anyway.

“By ‘letter of introduction,’ does he mean like the letter you had me deliver to Caerick?”

“Yes, that’s right, Mother.”

“What did you write to Caerick back then, anyway?”

Mai-Mai wasn’t sure why Cayna had decided to ask after so long, but she answered honestly.

“I suppose it was something along the lines of, *‘The person who gave you this is your grandmother.’*”

“Huh, I guess that counts as a letter of introduction.”

“No, that only counts as one among your relatives,” Opus griped.

“I usually endorse the person delivering the letter,” said Mai-Mai. “I talk about their various accomplishments and how they would benefit the recipient.”

“Hmm.”

“Does that make sense to you, Mother?”

“Yeah, I just don’t think there’s any good way to explain that Opus is a harmless demon.”

Siren and Mai-Mai’s mouths twitched at the same time. Opus scowled at his maid’s undisguised laughter, and Mai-Mai did her best not to giggle.

“How ’bout we come along?” Kuu piped up reasonably. She’d been perched atop Cayna’s shoulder swinging her legs back and forth, watching everyone.

Cayna heard this and struck a fist against her palm.

“Yeah. If we go together, we can make a beeline for Caerick.”

“Hm? Do you mean right now?” asked Mai-Mai.

Since Opus couldn’t afford to wait several days, he decided to teleport to Helshper immediately, first isolating the group’s environs to shield them from any onlookers.

Cayna neglected to properly check her Party Formation screen and teleported under the assumption that Opus was already in. This meant that everyone, Mai-Mai and all, flew to Helshper.

“...Ah.”

“Ooh.”

“Hey!”

“Oh dear.”

“Whaaaa?!”

The five appeared a short distance away from Helshper’s eastern gate. Only Mai-Mai, who was still reeling from getting teleported, gave a frantic yelp.

“Wait, what? Mai-Mai’s here, too?! No way!” Cayna furiously tapped away at her Stats Window and confirmed that Mai-Mai was indeed in her party. Her eyes widened. “Ohhh, sorry, Mai-Mai. Looks like I accidentally added you to my party.”

“That’s because you lumped together everyone around you,” Opus pointed out. “If you had actually checked, none of this would have happened.”

“Agh, how mortifying. Sorry, Mai-Mai.” Cayna hung her head in remorse.

“N-no, Mother, you have nothing to apologize for.” Mai-Mai, meanwhile, shook her head and urged her not to worry. “Besides, you can still return me to Felskeilo, right?”

“Sure. Of course. I’ll send you back even if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Please don’t make it the last thing you do. Your survivors won’t be happy.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

Cayna pulled herself together, and they entered Helshper proper. The group had neither a change of clothes nor much luggage, so the gatekeepers were suspicious. However, once they realized Mai-Mai was nobility from a neighboring country, they promptly let the group pass.

On the way to Sakaiya, Mai-Mai marveled at everything around her.

“Whoa, that shop is doing so well now... Ah, this tree—it used to be just a little bigger than me back then... My, the buildings over there have been replaced by a lovely park...”

She kept on comparing the town scenery to her memories, vacillating between joy and sadness. Even Sakaiya's storefront impressed her; it must have been much smaller the last time she visited. Cayna was curious to hear more.

The staff recognized Cayna from her previous visits, so she and her companions were able to meet with Idzik right away.

"Great-grandmother! It's been some time since we last met. How may I—? Grandmother?!"

Idzik froze in shock at the sight of Mai-Mai. An instant later, he turned on his heel and dashed into the store.

"...Mai-Mai."

"What is it, Mother?"

"Idzik was pretty shocked just now. You *have* met him before, right?"

"Yes, when he was about this big."

Mai-Mai used her thumb and index finger to indicate "*this big*." Definitely not human-sized. Even Opus, who had fallen into apathetic silence, pointed out that "meeting" her grandson as a fetus didn't count.

Cayna was about to speak when she heard loud, rapid footsteps from within the store. Caerick came running out like a madman.

"*Maman!*"

Like a high jump athlete, he kicked off the ground and spun gracefully through the air. Even his flowing outfit added a lively touch of color. His hands and feet came together elegantly, and he fell into a perfect kowtow.

"It has been too long!!"

"Hi, Caerick," Mai-Mai replied flatly, smiling and waving at her son. "Long time no see, huh."

Cayna and the others had ascertained something strangely off about Caerick's behavior; they all face-palmed at Mai-Mai's reaction. The dragonflies and baby chicks flying over their heads, meanwhile, were mere effects.

"I thought maybe you guys didn't get along or he was making some kind of grand apology!"

"I-I-I-I-I'm sorry, Mother!"

"Forgive me, Grandmother."

Cayna, oddly disappointed by this turn of events, was bristling with anger. This time, Mai-Mai was the one hanging her head in remorse. A large bead of sweat fell down Caerick's head; he dabbed at it with a handkerchief and bowed profusely.

All too late, Cayna remembered both Mai-Mai and Caerick had Telepathy and therefore could communicate remotely. The two had no

doubt schemed to prank Cayna the moment she arrived in Helshper.

She and her group were shown into a wide room measuring about thirty-three square meters. For whatever reason, there was only a single table in the center.

"They're related to her, all right," Opus grumbled with a hand to his forehead.

Siren brought a tea set out of nowhere (that is, her Item Box) and served everyone. Kuu whizzed around the room, impressed by how much space there was.

Once Mai-Mai and Caerick more or less apologized, Cayna introduced Opus. Mai-Mai also noted that he was her uncle.

"O-oh my—great-uncle, you say? What an honor. My name is Caerick Sakai. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Just call me Opus. I'm a mere footnote as far as Cayna is concerned, so you can drop the formalities."

"A footnote, eh?" Cayna cocked her head curiously at Opus's turn of phrase.

"A football!"

Kuu, meanwhile, swapped the word for a different, albeit less accurate one. It remained to be seen whether football actually existed in this world.

Caerick tried insisting he could never stoop to a first-name basis, but a single sharp glare from Opus forced him to reconsider.

"U-understood, Sir Opus."

"That will do, yes."

Their conversation made Siren quietly wonder who was in charge of this establishment.

"Well, then, what has brought you, your companions, and even my mother here today, Grandmother?"

Being called *Grandmother* even though she looked like the youngest by far of all the beautiful elves (and high elves) in the room made Cayna uncomfortable, even a little weirded out. She nonetheless managed to suppress her discomfort and urge Opus forward.

"So Opus is looking for something from Sakaiya."

"Oh! I will gladly provide anything within my power. On my good name, I shall prepare Uncle Opus's—no, *Sir* Opus's—requested goods immediately!"

"Wait, I'm not asking you for the Jeweled Branch of Horai or anything. I just need your emblem to pass the tourney preliminary."

"Emblem? Oh, you mean this?"

Caerick immediately withdrew a five-pointed insignia from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"Well, that sure was easy," Cayna said.

"It's simple enough for you to meet with me, Grandmother, but

the average adventurer must wait around a month first. Granted, I've had more free time lately, so the wait has been closer to twenty days instead."

"That long, huh?"

"Will you make it in time, even after the tournament staff sent you here so last minute?" Caerick asked Opus. "From what I recall, registration closes tomorrow."

"We'll be fine. I'll be taking this, then."

"Please do. I wish you the best of luck in the tournament."

"Thanks. Sorry for the trouble."

Opus snatched the emblem and teleported away with Siren.

Caerick's jaw hung open as he watched the last of Opus's wild magic dissipate. This was his silliest reaction so far that day: his eyes wide and mouth agape, his body audibly turning toward Cayna like a rusty hinge. Mai-Mai, her expression indiscernable, was the one to respond.

"You said Uncle Opus is a Skill Master like you, right, Mother?"

Cayna nodded, and Caerick collapsed on the spot.

"Out cold," said Kuu, who swooped down and poked his cheek.

"Oh, he'll be back to his usual self in no time," Mai-Mai assured them. Cayna knew where she was coming from but thought it was a bit harsh.

Sure enough, Caerick awoke roughly five minutes later and stood up.

"*Gasp!* Great Uncle Opus...! Grandmother, what's a Skill Master?"

"Remember what we were talking about before with the Crescent Moon Castle? Opus is its Skill Master. That place is packed with nasty tricks, though, so you'll die if you try to step inside."

Cayna never expected him to toss out a question right after waking up, but she had an answer ready and didn't hesitate to share her knowledge. Since they were blood-related (?), there was no reason to hide the existence of Skill Masters or Guardian Towers. Cayna trusted Caerick not to tell anyone.

On the other hand, she realized people were less likely to visit if they were aware of the castle's dangers. Even Cayna wouldn't go near it with a ten-foot pole; she remembered when several fellow Limit Breakers had once attempted to take the castle, treating it like a test of courage through a haunted house. The result: They all failed miserably, their subsequent respawning treated as a cautionary tale. With the horrors of this castle thus crystal clear, the group of players unanimously agreed that its owner had no intention of passing their skills to anyone.

Once Cayna mentioned this anecdote and the traps inside the castle to them, Mai-Mai and Caerick went pale and trembled in fear.

An understandable reaction.

“Come to think of it, Great Uncle Opus—no, Sir Opus—will participate in the tournament, correct?”

“Yeah, looks like it.”

“Won’t you participate as well, Grandmother?”

“If I did, Felskeilo would be wiped off the map!”

“Caerick, don’t suggest such horrors!” Mai-Mai yelled in protest.

No one was looking for a fight between Leadale’s strongest players, and Cayna had no intention of providing one.

Lots of players were obsessed with strength, and she didn’t understand why so many of them kept on pushing themselves to the top considering the hassle involved. That was the extent of Cayna’s attachment to strength. Being strong was all well and good, but she had zero interest in battling to decide who was the mightiest.

“Blacksmiths will often provide participants with swords as a way to promote business should that person win,” Caerick explained.

“Any weapon made around here would fall apart in Opus’s hands.”

Opus’s unique Skill Master weaponry could handle his greatest attacks better than the rarest weapons. However, a single strike *did* blast away every friend and foe in sight during one particular war. He received a slew of complaints from all involved after that and couldn’t use it in wartime ever again. It was a weapon of destruction.

Cayna enjoyed her friendly mother-daughter chat with Mai-Mai for a while longer but reluctantly decided it was time to get down to business after her second cup of tea. Siren had left behind the tea set, so Cayna gathered up everything to return to her later. Mai-Mai had been serving tea once Siren left.

“Anyway, I better go get the Guardian Tower ready.”

“Then I’ll wait here, Mother. Please come pick me up once you’re finished.”

“Nah, I can’t just leave you, Mai-Mai. Let’s go together. That way I won’t have to come back here.”

“Whaaaat?!”

“Huh?!”

Mai-Mai was wide-eyed with shock; Caerick, meanwhile, seemed jealous.

“What? You wanna come, too, Caerick?”

“I-if it’s not too much trouble...I would appreciate it for my own reference.”

He wasn’t about to let this opportunity slip by, and judging by how desperate he looked, he’d most likely grovel if Cayna said no.

“Gee, I dunno...”

Mai-Mai clung to Cayna, who gave a wishy-washy response.

“Mother, I understand what a hassle this would be for you, but won’t you please bring Caerick along as well? I’ll take full responsibility for him.”

“What?! There’s no need for you to burden yourself, Maman. I’m a grown man—I’ll take responsibility for myself!”

Cayna intervened just as the pair was about to launch into a bickering match.

“Okay, okay. No need to argue. No one is taking responsibility for anyone.”

“A-are you certain, Grandmother? Isn’t the tower filled with invaluable wisdom...?”

“I don’t know where you heard that, but the place is basically empty. It wouldn’t even make a decent tourist attraction.”

Nevertheless, Mai-Mai and Caerick drew close to her with shining, pleading eyes.

“There’s really nothing there, but okay,” she murmured as she opened her Party Formation screen and added Caerick. Then she informed Idzik that Caerick would be away for a bit so no one would think he’d been abducted and start panicking. Idzik, eager to see them off, watched closely from the hallway.

Cayna, Mai-Mai, and Caerick were in the courtyard complete with a sprawling, Japanese-style garden and a pond. She switched out her rings and hyped herself up by saying, “Okay, let’s get going!” The incantation itself wasn’t a big deal; she was just determined to not look awkward in front of her descendants.

Cayna placed Kuu on her shoulder and confirmed that Mai-Mai and Caerick were in her party. Then, she took a deep breath, put on the ring, and raised one hand.

“One who protects in times of trouble! I beseech you to rescue this depraved world from chaos!”

A flash of light, followed by a dome-shaped grid that swelled around them. Phantom branches and foliage filled the grid, and a moment later, everything—Cayna, Mai-Mai, Kuu, Caerick, and the grid itself—vanished.

Idzik continued staring enviously at the spot where they had disappeared.

There was a lag between the visual effect and teleportation to the Guardian Tower, so the process was instantaneous for those being teleported. The trio landed in a semi-dome world divided by green gridlines: the Ninth Skill Master’s Guardian Tower located in the Battle Arena.

““W-we’re inside a Guardian Tower?!”” Mai-Mai and Caerick exclaimed in astonishment when their feet touched the floor’s strange texture. The sky projected on the ceiling had them baffled, goggling at

the plushie sun.

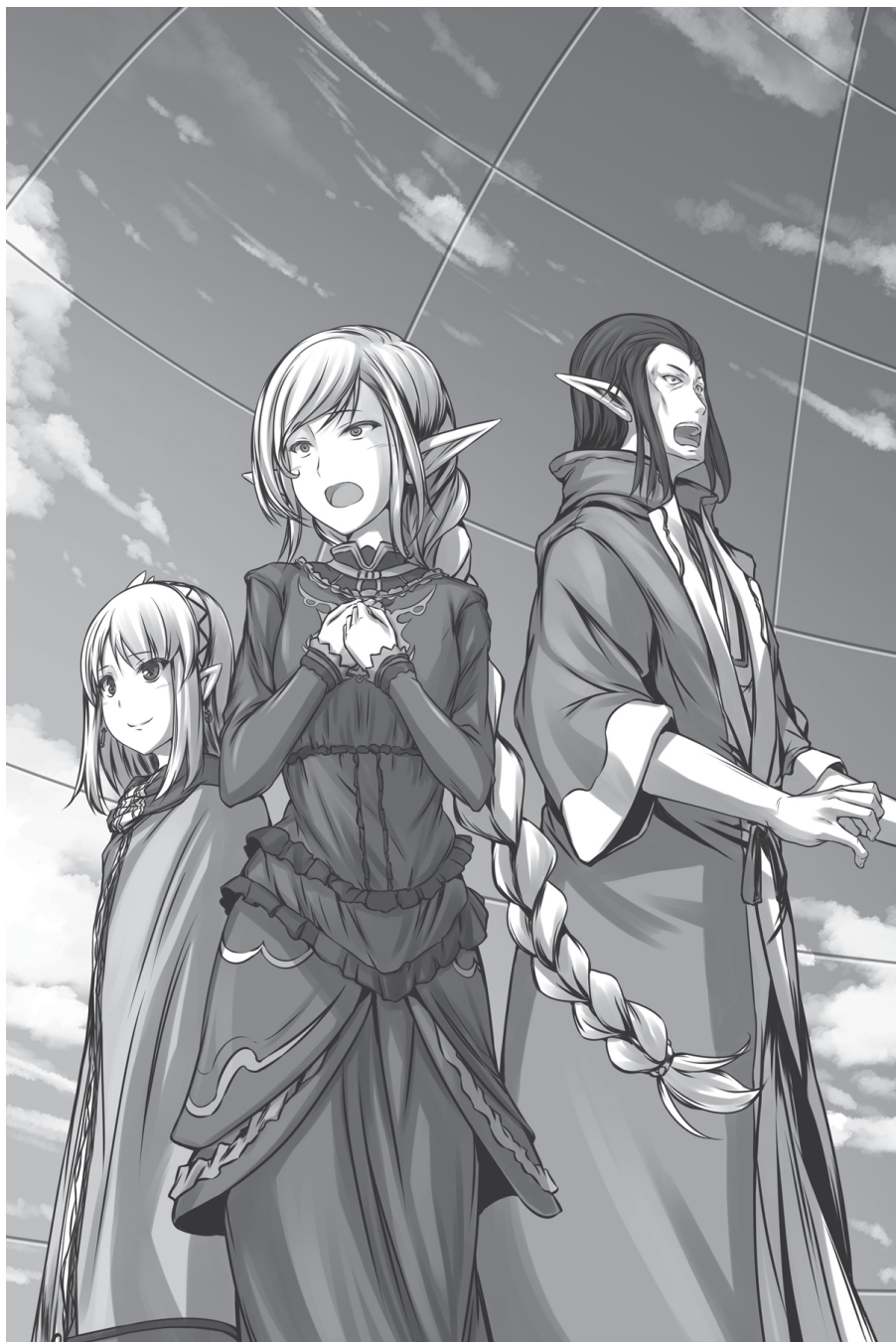
“See? I told you. It’s a whole load of nothing.”

“To the contrary, Mother! The spectacle alone has left me breathless!”

“Huh?”

“I must agree! We stand here in the heart of an ancient, sacred mystery... I shall not speak a word to anyone, but it fills me with an overwhelming sense of superiority!”

“I—I see...”



Mai-Mai clutched at her chest, spellbound, and Caerick blubbered as he rubbed one cheek against the floor. Not a good look for the Academy's headmaster and the owner of Sakaiya.

"What's this? Do we have guests, Master?"

At the center of the dome, the smoky Guardian rose from the maple tree in the flowerpot and took human form. It placed a hand to its chest with a reverent bow. Spooked, Mai-Mai and Caerick shuffled behind Cayna to hide in her shadow, but both were several sizes larger than she was; they could hardly pass as stuffed animals.

"Wh-what is that?"

"A monster? Still, this aura..."

"What's with you guys?"

Mai-Mai and Caerick narrowed their eyes and scrutinized the Guardian warily.

"They appear quite shocked. What shall we do, Master?"

"Nothing, really."

Neither elf could do anything to the smoky Guardian. Cayna ignored their odd behavior and focused on the task at hand.

First, she took out one half of the Pair of Eyes from her Item Box and handed it to the Guardian.

"What shall I do with this item?"

"There's gonna be a tournament in the Battle Arena soon. You'll be able to see it from here, right?"

"Indeed I will."

The moment the Guardian said this, approximately ten window panels opened up in midair displaying every section of the Battle Arena.

"Hwa?!"

Mai-Mai and Caerick were taken aback. From the panels, they saw people cleaning the spectator seats, decorating corridors, placing information signs, demarcating areas with rope and planks, and rushing around with boxes. Everyone was hard at work as the last few days to the tourney counted down.

"I want to broadcast the tournament to the remote village with the Pair of Eyes. Can you do that for me?"

"Very well. I shall deliver a thrilling spectacle."

"Great, I appreciate it."

The smoky Guardian immediately used the Pair of Eyes like a drone to display a bird's-eye view of the Battle Arena. The receiving Pair of Eyes would begin flashing once the projector in the village added a new channel, so either Roxine or Roxilius would switch over to it. Probably.

With this, Cayna's mission to give the village a TV of sorts was essentially finished. She let out a sigh of relief.

“Mother!”

“Uwagh, you surprised me! What’s up, Mai-Mai?”

Cayna turned around to find her daughter standing there rigidly with a stern look. Caerick appeared shocked by his mother’s menacing expression as well and fell mute.

“Is Felskeilo’s Battle Arena a Guardian Tower by any chance?”

“That’s right.”

“What is the meaning of this?! How dare we set foot on such consecrated ground and use it for our own ends! I would not be the least bit surprised if we were struck down at any moment!”

Cayna didn’t really understand why Mai-Mai seemed to resent that the Battle Arena was also a Guardian Tower. Mai-Mai then started going on about God’s love—likely Skargo’s influence. Cayna’s knowledge of this world’s religious beliefs was quite shallow; after all, she could use Holy Magic without any religious know-how. But given how pious the cathedral’s visitors were, she could see how even mages like Mai-Mai would pay their respects.

“At this rate, we’ll need to advise the king and arrange for an altar to be built in the Battle Arena—”

“Okay, stop!” Cayna clapped a hand over Mai-Mai’s mouth before she had a chance to babble on. “If you need an altar, there’s already one in the river.”

“Mrmph... Y-you mean the one for the river god I heard about before? Yes, that’s true...,” she began before freezing. “Wait—the capital has two Guardian Towers?!”

“Yeah. I dunno what you’re so freaked out about, Mai-Mai.”

“Treasure is more likely to be looted as people freely come and go. How can I not panic?!”

“Do you see any treasure around here?”

“...No, I don’t.”

If anything, the Guardian’s flowerpot was the only “treasure” around. And even Cayna, a Skill Master, couldn’t move it.

“To enter here, one must be a Skill Master and possess the necessary ring, or, like you, be an acquaintance of my master. We Guardians will not recognize anyone else.”

Once the smoky Guardian explained this in no uncertain terms, Mai-Mai’s head drooped weakly.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Look, Mai-Mai, I’m not mad. What’s with you all of a sudden?”

“It’s just that I was mistaken.”

“Mistaken? About what?”

“I believed that ancient secrets should remain secret.”

Cayna grimaced at this. She didn’t mind being offered a concerned word of advice, but the sacred Guardian Towers didn’t seem so sacred when she remembered why the Skill Masters wanted them in the first place.

Guardian Towers were originally meant as an escape from greedy players and had nothing to do with either holiness or treasure. They were facilities designed to minimize external annoyances.

Cayna felt bad for Mai-Mai, since she was so enamored with the legends, but that was the honest truth.

“Towers aren’t as ‘sacred’ as you might think. Not to be a buzzkill or anything, but maybe lower your expectations a bit.” She stroked her daughter’s head as consolation.

“...Okay.”

Caerick, meanwhile, was more interested in the Guardian than in their dispute, inspecting it from every angle.

CHAPTER 4

A Tourney,
the Unforeseen,
the Unexpected, and
Those Acquired

After returning Caerick to Helshper and arriving in Felskeilo with Mai-Mai via the cathedral, Cayna headed to the remote village to check on the projector.

“Sheesh, everyone’s been glued to that thing and causin’ a fuss for the past few days now.”

Hands on her hips, Marelle looked at the crowd gathered in front of the projector and gave a wry smile. Perhaps it was because her daughter, Lytt, was among them, but she seemed a bit exasperated.

While Cayna was away, Roxine ordered the villagers to keep a reasonable distance after noticing some who would get close enough to the screen to lick it. After talking it over with each other, the Double Rs put up a rope about two meters from the screen. Those who crossed it would be banned from drinking alcohol for ten days in both the tavern and their own homes. Those who reported violators could enjoy a drink on the house. Marelle wasn’t the only one keeping an eye out, either. Friends and other village ladies had joined her as well.

Cayna heard all this upon her return, when Roxine politely asked her to electrify the rope.

“If I do that, I just *know* someone is going to get fried instantly!”

Kuu pointed and laughed as Cayna smacked Roxine with a paper fan.

“What if one of the kids breaks the rules? Like Luka or Lytt?”

“Then they’ll be assigned to clean the bathhouse. If they report an anonymous tip, they’ll receive our high-quality fruit juice.”

“Anonymous tip’...”

The fruit juice Cayna made with her skills was very sweet yet sugar-free. It was popular with not only children but the village women as well.

“I’m guessing Mimily hasn’t been much of a problem.”

“Miss Mimily is apparently enjoying the tavern’s lively

atmosphere and hasn't paid much attention to the projector."

"If anything, she has shown keen interest in the view from your tower, Lady Cayna," Roxilius added.

"I see. Maybe I should give Mimily the chance to swim in the sky."

"...I would suggest otherwise."

"Really?"

Roxilius narrowed his eyes, and he waved a hand in front of him. Cayna simply thought, *I'll ask her next time* and dropped the issue.

When she returned home, they held a meeting to discuss everything that had happened while she was away. Granted, three days wasn't very long, and the village's relaxed atmosphere suggested all was well.

"Did Opus come back?"

"No, not even once. Neither has Lady Siren."

The Double Rs shook their heads in unison. As usual, Cayna had no idea what Opus was thinking, so it was impossible to predict his motives.

Did he find a third party member? Did he actually have one all along, and if so, was he still training them? Was he hiding away in his own tower?

"There is another matter, Lady Cayna," Roxilius began.

"Hmm? What's that?"

"A worrisome situation arose while you were away."

"Oh yeah? How much could've happened in three days? I can't imagine it was an attack, since you two are always on top of things."

"No, the issue concerns merchants and travelers."

"Something to do with the projector, right?"

"Yes."

Cayna figured as much. According to Elineh, most merchants were a troublesome lot who believed that anything could be bought for the right price.

"One was particularly unruly. Said they'd offer a fair price and demanded we sell it."

"So you requested an insane amount?"

"No, the projector is not for sale. I stood my ground."

Cayna was positive Roxilius didn't resolve this conflict through words alone. Since he had more battle skills than Roxine, it was his responsibility to deal with visitors and unreasonable demands while Cayna was away. Many underestimated Roxilius at first glance, due to his gentle, youthful looks, but his Dread skill must have made quick work of that nagging merchant. The man likely ran home with his tail between his legs.

"Is that all?" Cayna asked.

This time, it was Roxine who answered as she brought more tea.

"There was also a Peeping Tom."

"A Peeping Tom? At the bathhouse? Didn't I put up a barrier on the women's side?"

Just to be safe, a solid barrier that doubled as a two-way mirror was erected around the women's bath. It allowed a person to see out but not in. This was also why the bathhouse doubled as an evacuation center in the (unlikely) event of a stampede or similar emergency.

The culprit was slithering midair over the women's open-air bath (on top of the barrier) when Roxilius spotted him and knocked him down. Once caught, the man, a self-proclaimed minstrel, said it was his second time in the village.

"Where is he now?"

"We have already handed him over to the Helshper guards at the border."

"Uh-oh. They must've been pretty angry."

"They were."

The Helshper border guards considered the remote village their ideal vacation getaway and had little tolerance for anyone or anything that threatened this. When Roxilius handed the culprit over, the guards told him the punishment for peeping was one month of unpaid hard labor at the border fortress.

It turned out the lurker's true target was Mimily alone. He'd seen her eating at the tavern and became smitten, then sought his chance.

"He tried to shoot his shot that quickly? Is his brain rotten?"

"One would assume so. I wish I had crushed the man before we handed him over."

No need to ask what part of this man Roxine would have crushed, of course.

Roxilius did his best to ignore her and Cayna's fiendish grins.

After her meeting with the Double Rs, a group raised a ruckus as they raced down the road outside.

"It's starting! It's starting! It's on!"

"Let's hurry to the inn or we'll miss it!"

It was obvious from all the excitement that the tourney had finally begun. Other people could be heard rushing from their homes, and the village was suddenly whipped into a fervor.

However, things were slightly different from what Cayna was told.

"Different, you say?" Roxine asked.

"Looking at the participants, I bet the knight captain Shining Saber will use his 'scrying' to figure out how long the tournament will last," Cayna said.

""""Scrying?"""

The Double Rs were confused at the unfamiliar word.

“Shining Saber can discriminate between fighters with Search, right?”

Isn't that kind of a gimmick? Cayna thought as she voiced her predictions. The two nodded in understanding.

However, even Shining Saber was undoubtedly concerned this time around, since the more powerful Opus and Siren, plus one other, would participate as well. The opening ceremony and tournament were scheduled to last for a total of three days.

“I heard today is just the opening ceremony and a demonstration,” Cayna said.

“A demonstration?”

“Of what, might I ask?”

“It's an event where anyone can challenge the top three fighters from last year's solo tournament.”

“Ohhh.”

Roxine's and Roxilius's sudden lack of interest was comical.

Since Cayna had been in the capital until the previous day, Skargo brought the tourney schedule to the village as soon as possible. Not many would have the gall to make the High Priest their errand boy.

“Kuu will join, too!”

“You don't have the Go Easy skill, so someone would definitely die.”

“Oh, true.”

“Also, I imagine the whole town would be chasing after you...”

“Very true.”

An encounter with a fairy was said to bring happiness, and within the capital, it wasn't only children who believed this.

“All righty,” Cayna said as she stood and prepared to tell the werecats her next course of action. “Starting today, I'll take another look at the projector, then fly to the Battle Arena again.”

“Understood.”

“When might we expect your return?”

The Double Rs bowed in unison, but only Roxilius asked when Cayna would return.

“The Battle Arena tower is fully charged now, so there's always the chance something might set it off. I'll keep an eye on it until the tournament is over.”

“Understood.”

Whenever intruders arrived, Cayna's tower would automatically stretch the steps and forest labyrinth below into infinity without the Guardian's permission. She couldn't say for certain whether or not the Battle Arena possessed the same function, so she decided to keep an eye on it just in case. Cayna tried asking the smoky Guardian, but it

said unsettling things like, “*I do not understand.*” Her only option was to bet on the original Skill Master Kyotaro’s innate benevolence.

Let us shift to the events of the Battle Arena during the opening ceremony.

The king had just delivered a word of thanks from the highest seat in the stadium, and a knight participant shouted, “*In the spirit of chivalry, may we duel with honor!*”

Opus and his team weren’t knights or anything like that, so such conscientiousness didn’t apply to them. He glanced around with the Multi-View skill and confirmed there were no strange tricks. Multi-View allowed the user to look in every direction like a compound-eyed insect, and since skills could be combined, he cast Search and Disclosure as well. Several minor issues appeared, but for the most part there was nothing malicious in nature. Excessive friendliness would have been an even bigger problem.

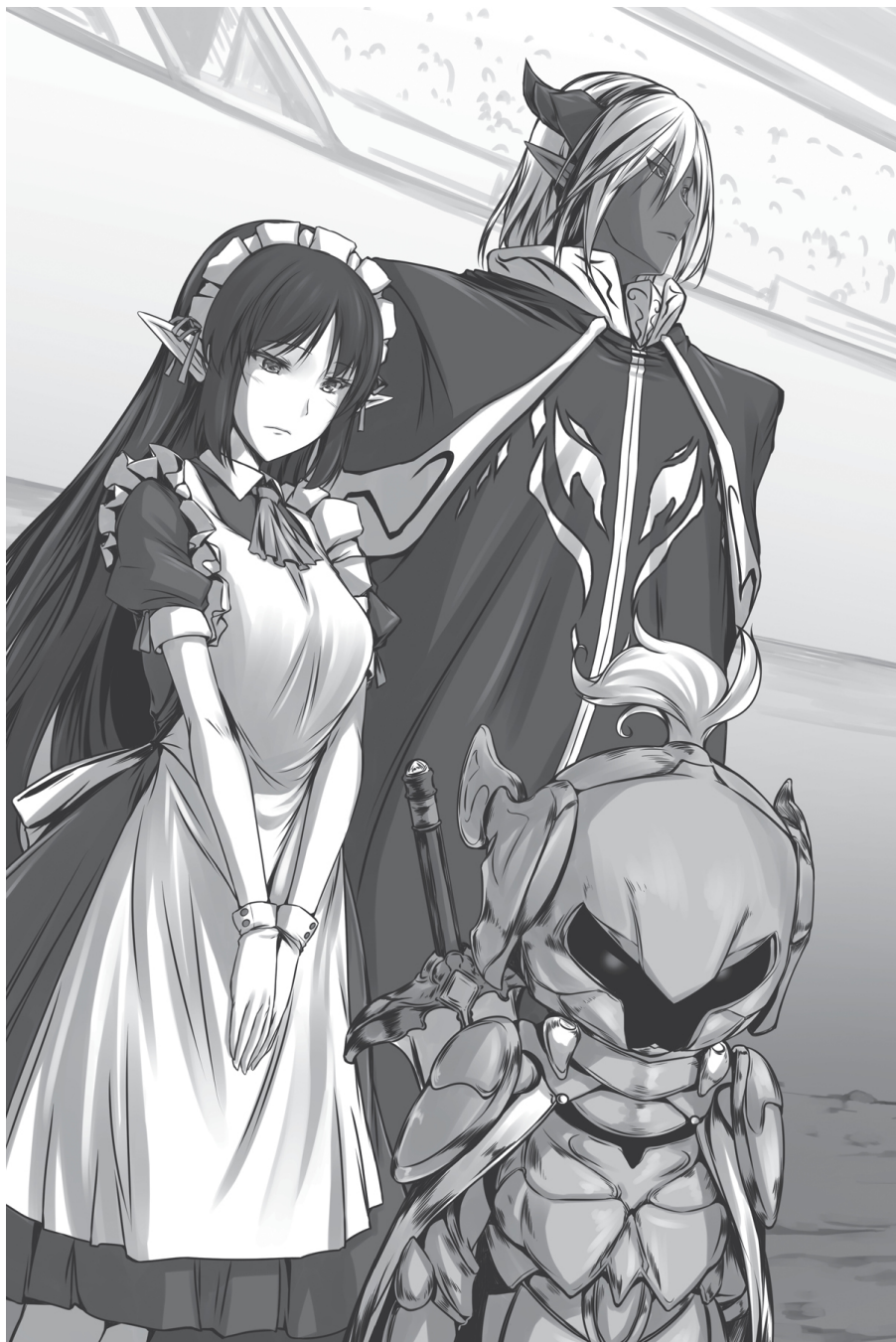
Besides himself, the knight captain, and one other participant, Opus confirmed several other players within the spectator stands of the Battle Arena tower. He felt their gazes radiate with sharp resentment, and the corners of his mouth instinctively formed a smile.

There were a total of five registered parties. There were initially six, but one ran off during the matchup raffle. Their terrified stares fell on Opus, so they were either players or adventurers who had recognized him.

During the raffle, Opus was able to confirm two players. One was the level-427 knight captain Shining Saber. They had never met in person, but Opus knew a bit about him from Cayna. There was also Cohral, a tank member from the party known as the Armor of Victory. He was level 392. Opus hadn’t met him, either, but got a general overview from Cayna.

The boastful Shining Saber had cast Search on everyone as soon as the tournament kicked off, and Opus remembered the sheer panic on the dragoid’s face when he caught sight of him. Cohral glanced over at him as well.

In all honesty, almost every participant and spectator was fixated on Opus’s nameless party. They had the bare minimum of three members: the robed demon Opus, the indifferent elf maid Siren, and last, a small figure in full armor who stood at the forefront. The contestant wasn’t some dullahan-like monster. That much was clear.



Everyone stared suspiciously at the big-medium-small lineup.

Can they fight?

Do they even want to fight?

Are they about to die?

The thoughts of the spectators and participants (with two exceptions) were centered around these three points. In any case, outside some unfortunate accident, killing an opponent was grounds for disqualification.

“Thank goodness no one noticed,” Cayna murmured from her distant village beyond the projector.

A demonstration was scheduled after the opening ceremony, so the participants had some free time. In the past, they could stay in an aristocratic villa near the Battle Arena that offered comfortable beds and limitless food, but Opus had also heard stories of unchecked alcohol and women from fellow contestants. There had been previous incidents of angry, violent drunks and poisonings by women, so apparently these were no longer provided. Moreover, the knights would remain on high alert throughout the tourney, so all participants were instructed to remain in the area.

Opus already had alcohol in his Item Box and could make it himself at any time, so that was no issue. He also had absolutely no interest in women.

As Opus passed through a corridor to exit the Battle Arena, he stopped when rapid footsteps approached him from behind.

“Shall I dispose of them?” the expressionless Siren suggested with unsettling composure.

“...”

Opus had the elf and small suit of armor stand down while they awaited the approaching players. It wasn’t long before Shining Saber and Cohral appeared.

“I am Opuskettenshultheimer Crosstettbomber!”

Before the two could even react, Opus took the initiative and cast Dread. They cried out as an immense force threatened to crush them, but the demon soon revoked his spell. He looked at them wearily.

“That’s what happens when you approach a high-level player unprepared.”

He’d plainly been planning to mess with them all along.

The demon guffawed, but neither Shining Saber nor Cohral had the energy to complain.

“Damn it! Ya got us.”

“We were only going to introduce ourselves!”

“I know.”

““And you did all that anyway?!””

“Man, this guy’s just as nasty as Cayna said.”

They faced Opus again but only had complaints for him.

“You’re Shining Saber, the sub-leader of the Silver Moon Horsemen, and Cohral, an average guild member. I think you’ve each fallen for my traps about four times.”

“You seriously remember?!” Shining Saber exclaimed.

“Those names are pretty long. How about a name-changing trap?”

“Pay attention, damn it! And don’t you freakin’ *dare* try your disgusting tricks on us!”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I’ll do you a favor and swap them out with magic. How’s ‘Tweety’ sound for a new name?”

“This guy’s a monster!”

“That’s sure putting it lightly! What is he?!”

Shining Saber and Cohral, now reduced to two clueless, raging stooges, had been thrown to the wolves. Then, they were struck by a mysterious spell.

“Aghhhhh!”

“I don’t want to be Tweetyyy!”

The men fell to their knees with their heads hung low. They checked their Stats Windows and soon realized their names were unaltered.

““It’s...it’s the same!””

Shining Saber and Cohral shouted for joy and hugged each other. Just as the men were celebrating their relief, an icy voice rang out.

“Men hugging? You disgust me,” said Opus.

Even if they decided to argue, it was exactly what it looked like. They simply fell into a depressed silence.

“Well, I’d say that’s enough fooling around. What’s your business with me?”

If anyone was sick of shenanigans, it was Shining Saber and Cohral. However, their small boat had capsized and left them too tired to argue.

Despite being thrown into hell a mere five minutes after meeting Opus, the two joined the demon in the reception room of his temporary lodgings. There was no staff available, so each guest was responsible for themselves. Incidentally, damaging the building’s interior and furnishings would incur a fee, so Opus had wasted no time casting preservation magic everywhere. Apart from the knights, the participants all appeared to exert caution.

Opus had Siren, and serving him was her forte. Perhaps to express her displeasure, the maid had placed water, of all things, in front of Shining Saber and Cohral.

“Isn’t your maid kinda scary?”

“The two of you must have accidentally made a rude comment

about her chest and butt.”

An instant later, a tray came flying out of nowhere and stuck in the back of the demon’s head. Siren had apparently learned a thing or two from Marelle. It was a bone-chilling sight.

“So let me ask again. What is your business with me?”

“Can I ask something before that?” Shining Saber ventured.

“If it’s about the tray, I’ll immediately throw you from this house. Are you all right with that?”

Neither Shining Saber nor Cohral could hide their discomfort, but they continued the discussion at hand. The tray in question dyed half of Opus’s head red as crimson droplets steadily dripped.

“I take it you wish to know why I’ve entered the tournament?”

“Y-yeah! It’s open to anyone, though. As long as you passed the preliminaries, I’ve got no complaints here!” Shining Saber emphasized. He, too, was a participant, but he also planned to invite any promising warriors to join the knights. That was his secret mission.

In that sense, Cohral passed with flying colors. However, the knights could not have too many players, lest it disrupt each country’s balance of power. Be that as it may, a Transcendental appearing in the tourney was entirely unexpected. The issue was that everyone else would get steamrolled before they even knew what hit them and come off as a pathetic weakling.

“It’s like nuking an ant. Up against you, that’s all even me and Shining Saber will ever be.”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha. I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“It’s no laughin’ matter. What’s your endgame? Wealth, fame? I doubt you just wanna win.”

“None of the above. You can’t even begin to imagine my motives.”

“Come on, you can tell us!”

“Don’t act all vague and try to confuse us. Limit Breaker or not, if you dare threaten this country, I’ll strike back even if I don’t stand a chance!” Shining Saber said sharply as he placed one hand on his sword.

Cohral followed suit and shifted into a crouch. The pair cast every battle skill in their arsenal as they zealously searched for the slightest opening.

After a prolonged staring contest, Opus shrugged wearily.

“You’re both too much,” he said while waving a hand in surrender. “Just stop. A death match won’t accomplish anything. I don’t want to fight here, so put away your weapons.”

“Haaah.”

“Pheeeew. I think I just aged ten years...”

Shining Saber had been fully prepared to sacrifice himself, but his

fighting spirit dissipated the second the tension broke. Cohral broke out in a sweat and collapsed to the floor.

“Don’t scare me like that,” he complained.

“We need the remaining players in this world.”

“Huh?”

“Players?”

“You must’ve seen them countless times as a knight captain. Enemies from the game, I mean.”

“You mean like the ones from that attack earlier?!”

Not much time had passed since the lycanthrope known as a leohead led the local monsters in a charge against Felskeilo. Among the knights, the spoils of war included the lingering bitter aftertaste of cowardice. To their eternal shame, they had turned traitorous after being easily bewitched by the monsters.

However, from Shining Saber’s perspective, the modern-day knights were physically robust but mentally inferior to the game’s enemies. Their only recourse was to let fate decide. Telling the citizens, who knew the details of the incident, it had simply been a difference in power was out of the question, so the knights’ dishonor could only be cleared by their own actions. Shining Saber could only watch his subordinates in frustration, so his goal for this tourney was to demonstrate his peak fighting prowess to the masses and restore the knights’ honor.

“Are you sayin’ you know how that happened?!”

“I am.”

Shining Saber slammed his fist on the table; he could have smashed it to pieces if he wanted. A boom echoed, but it was only thanks to the Preservation Magic left that no harm was done.

“You’re getting too worked up, Shining Saber. Try to calm down.”

Cohral gave his increasingly irate companion a firm smack on the shoulder and brought him back to his senses. A certain amount of force was needed against a dragoid’s scales or it was likely to go unnoticed.

“Does this have something to do with the large barrier in the Brown Kingdom? Countless monsters from the Game Era are sealed in there. Maybe they got out?” Cohral asked Opus in hopes of a conclusive answer. It was something he’d been thinking about ever since his conversation with Cayna.

First of all, this world shared too many similarities with the game. The most extreme example was the Guardian Towers, and Pillage Drop Points used in war were utterly pointless here. Although an accident, monsters like that penguin wreaked havoc once awakened, and it was nearly impossible to find anyone strong enough to defeat them.

“Well, we’ll talk it over at some point. I’ve said all I can,” replied Opus. He let the others have their say but cut the conversation short without revealing too much. Immediately afterward, the demon stood and approached Siren, who had been waiting patiently in a corner of the room. He reached for her shoulder.

“Hey!”

“Hmph. If you wish so badly to make me to talk, I challenge you to a Skill Master’s trial.”

“A trial? I thought Cayna was in charge of the Battle Arena.”

“That is an unrelated matter. If you win this tourney, I’ll tell you the reason.”

Opus smirked and then teleported somewhere with Siren. Any attempt to chase after them was futile, so the bitter pair reluctantly gave up.

“As usual, he loves screwin’ with people.”

“He’s even worse than those live interviews suggested.”

As both resentfully reminisced, the door to the room swung open. Assuming Opus had returned, the men readied themselves only to encounter a different Skill Master.

“Sheesh. You guys deserve a medal for putting up with Opus.”

“Ah, Cayna.”

“Hold up, where’d you come from?! This building is for contestants only!” Shining Saber demanded, pointing an accusatory finger.

Cayna flushed. “Ah, um, well...,” she began, before shooting him an angry glare. “While I was hanging out in front of the building, they let me right in as your fiancée! Hurry up and do something about that fake rumor already! Just how long are you going to let this joke drag out?!”

She completely snapped.

Being known as “the knight captain’s fiancée” to every knight and soldier in the country caused Cayna no end of trouble. Yet despite her complaints, that same title also gave her easy access to restricted areas. The knights’ tarnished image was likely rooted in such lax regulations more than in dishonor.

“F-fiancée? Where the heck did that come from?”

“This is why everyone named ‘Shining Saber’ is evil!”

“Gwah?!”

Shining Saber’s mistake was made with the best of intentions, so he couldn’t say anything. He fell into a painful silence, and Cayna glared at him before turning to Cohral.

“What? Are you here to laugh at me?”

“No. You sure do have a victim complex, huh?”

“So why *are* you here?”

“I was just wondering how you ended up in an event like this in the first place.”

“Oh, that.”

“You always kind of hang back in your party, right? Acting as a tank, handling odd jobs, and that sort of thing.”

“How do you know so much about my party? Are you stalking me or something?”

After Cohral woke in this world, he formed a party called the Armor of Victory with the young men of the village who took him in. As a player, he had always kept his true power hidden and upheld the role of the unsung hero.

“No, the mages told me. They wish you wouldn’t hold back, though.”

“Tch. Those guys, huh...?”

Cayna had met up with the Armor of Victory on multiple occasions and come to know Cohral’s companions quite well. While he was busy talking to Opus, Cayna had gotten in touch with them and learned it was Cohral’s idea to participate in the tournament despite his discreet nature. Something about her must have made them realize he and Cayna shared a close connection (as fellow players).

She gave props to the party’s mages who simply laughed and said, “*We’ve known each other for ten years, after all.*”

“You guys will be up against the knights in the very first round, so everything worked out.”

“Ah, you saw the matchup?”

There were five teams in total, so a raffle to decide each battle was held before the ceremony. The seeded team was an all-mage adventurer guild from Otaloquess, and the first round was the knights versus the Armor of Victory. Opus would face a flamboyantly dressed party in the second round.

The seeded party automatically qualified for the quarterfinal via a second lottery and would battle the victors. This was set to take place the entire following day, so distribution of stamina was undeniably a main topic of conversation among the remaining teams. However, one party had an outsider among them.

“I gave you Valhalla, so use it. Make sure you fillet Shining Saber.”

“You tryin’ to kill me?!” the dragoid snapped right after bouncing back from his pit of agony. “Hey, if Cohral is gonna use that, I’ve got an idea, too!”

“Huh?”

“Cayna, you mentioned a reward before! Instead of skills, give me a sword!”

“Before’...? Oh, you mean for helping out with the white whale.”

Shining Saber was talking about the time Cayna had fished out the white whale tower and made it a protective river god. She had asked the knights and princess for their help and planned to give him three skills. Her friend had been silent thus far, but this unexpected opportunity seemingly inspired him to request the ideal sword instead.

“Hmm. If we’re talking swords, I’ve got just the thing. One sec.”

One Guardian Ring and chant later, Cayna was in the Battle Arena tower. Having remembered the contents of Kyotaro’s Item Box, she carefully rummaged through it, found the sword in question, and returned to Shining Saber.

“Hey there, sorry for the wait!”

“What wait? That was speedy,” Cohral said.

“There’s no effect when you come back, huh?”

“*That’s* what impresses you?”

The mood was light as Cayna handed the sword to Shining Saber. Since Kyotaro was the former guildmaster of the Silver Moon Horsemen, she figured he wouldn’t mind if she gave it to a fellow guild member.

“The Sycophant Sword Runberserk?!”

“It’s one rank beneath Valhalla, but considering the difference in level between you and Cohral, it should be a fair fight.”

“Wait, doesn’t it have a double slash attack that sends you flyin’? I’d probably die from the aftershock alone.”

“Isn’t that just another chance to show your stuff, Shining Saber?” Cayna asked with nonchalance as she handed the sword over and concluded her business.

Shining Saber had no complaints about borrowing it, but he wondered about her reaction. He carefully examined every centimeter of the sword, and the dragoid’s heart danced.

He wanted to swing it already. He wanted to cross swords with someone. What effect would it have?

“Shining Saber, that face says you want to test it out on the next person who crosses your path...”

“He’s a madman. We’re all doomed.”

“You better watch it. I’ll remember that tomorrow, Cohral.”

“Eek!”

Cohral trembled as Shining Saber pointed the blade at him with a vicious smile. The thought of squaring up against it the next day gave him a headache, but there was no question a single hit would be enough to send his party into the abyss. To prevent this, Cohral had no choice but to put himself directly in the line of fire. Rousing himself, he firmly gripped his own sword, Valhalla, and entered a fierce staring contest with Shining Saber.

Incidentally, Cayna considered her work done once she handed

over the sword, and she soon headed back to Mai-Mai's house. Cohral and Shining Saber finally realized her absence when Siren suddenly returned and chased them from the building.

The first battle began early the next morning. Every participant was forcefully awoken at the same time, and they ate a hearty breakfast before heading to the Battle Arena.

Although the market had just opened, the stadium was already overcrowded. People were crammed in the corridors, and anyone watching the scene would have been struck speechless for far less.

After a brief explanation and a blaring trumpet tune as an opener, the tournament was soon underway. Rumor had it that a band used to play grand music for appearance's sake, but it was kept concise after an incident where the impatient crowd jeered and threw things into the Arena. The fact that it was a place where citizens could release their frustrations was a contributing factor.

When determining the winner and loser, it was standard for either both opponents to agree or for His Majesty, who presided over the battle, to make the final call. The audience could also cast a majority vote, depending on the situation. It was pretty haphazard.

The tournament also used to have a referee, but this, too, was removed, since contestants constantly bribed their way to victory. It made anyone want to say, *"If you're going to fight, go all out!"*

The first round was five knights versus five adventurers. The spectators anticipated a messy, close-combat battle between multiple fighters and voiced their doubts when one person carrying a large sword stepped forward from each camp as representative. It was Shining Saber for the knights and Cohral for the adventurers.

The clueless spectators saw this and began to openly gawk and jeer.

"C'mon! We doin' this or not?!"

"Are they gonna fight one-on-one and count the most wins?"

"I ain't here to watch a solo match!"

"Get serious!"

The other participants waiting their turn along the walls of the Battle Arena heard this, and only Opus chuckled with amusement, despite the awkward atmosphere.

"Keh-keh-keh. These fools don't even realize what's about to happen. I hope they're 'blown' away."

"Master, your tastes truly run wicked."

"..."

Opus was the only one acting like a nefarious kingpin and caught the attention of the other fighters. Whether or not he realized this was unclear.

“At any rate, now we’ll get this irritating knockout tournament out of the way faster.”

Opus glanced around at the participants who awaited the outcome of the battle with bated breath. His primary focus was on those awaiting their turn.

Meanwhile, Cayna, who watched live via her Pair of Eyes in the Guardian’s room, nodded in satisfaction as Roxilius contacted her from the remote village. With the main tournament finally underway, the inn’s tavern had been packed with villagers since that morning. Aside from Mimily and those who couldn’t leave their fields, everyone was in attendance. It seemed the mermaid was averse to violence and had an inherent dislike for competitive fighting.

“Is this not a thing in mermaid culture?”

“I have not heard further details, but most likely,” Roxilius answered.

“Hmm. I guess it’s a sensitive subject, so don’t be too nosy.”

“Understood.”

“Well then, I’ll leave you to it, Rox. Sorry to ask so much, but let me know if you have technical difficulties like static noise or the sound cutting out.”

“As you wish.”

She couldn’t see his face, but Cayna imagined Roxilius offering a polite bow as their conversation ended.

The tournament kept him busier than ever. In addition to patrolling the village, he also had to maintain the projector and check for issues, watch the children, and monitor visitors. Roxilius also single-handedly cleaned, did laundry, and kept house, but his results were far different from the domestic Roxine’s.

“I should really give him a vacation when I get back,” Cayna said.

I’ve gotta show my appreciation, whether he likes it or not, she thought.

“Anyway...”

Cayna sat on a laughably high-backed throne she took from her Item Box and entered Relaxed Spectator Mode. A plate of cookies Roxine had made sat on a small table in the Guardian’s room, along with three cups of black tea.

Kuu immediately alighted on the table and stuffed a cookie in her mouth. Crumbs flew everywhere.

“Come join us, Mai-Mai.”

“C-can we really have tea here?”

Cayna had invited her daughter to the Guardian’s room as thanks for having her over. Mai-Mai had first sat down to watch the tournament outside from the myriad of panels floating around them, but her discomfort was evident.

“You don’t mind having Mai-Mai around, right?” Cayna asked the

smoky Guardian standing at attention beside her.

“Indeed. There is no issue,” it replied, nodding like a true yes-man.

Was it unable to stand up against a Skill Master or simply obedient? Perhaps Cayna and the Guardians could forge a whole new relationship if she tinkered with the system inside her, but she’d have to master it first.

Despite the Guardian’s acceptance, Mai-Mai’s teacup trembled in her hand.

“You’ll never taste it that way.”

“I’m well aware!”

Cayna never expected Mai-Mai to talk back like that and felt like a pigeon hit by a peashooter.

At any rate, outside the tower, a battle for the ages loomed in the worst sort of way.

““Arghhhhhhhh!!””

Shining Saber wielded his black blade while Cohral brandished his white one. Then, in the blink of an eye, both sides clashed in the center of the Battle Arena.

Shiiiiing!

A single *clang* echoed, and their positions alternated.

Before anyone knew what was happening, there was another sharp clash, and their positions shifted again. Simultaneous cheers and screams flew from the audience. The shouting came from the ravenous spectators at the forefront, but applause rose from the higher seats in the back.

The clash between Runberserk and Valhalla immediately released a shock wave across the surrounding area. It struck each body to the core, and a powerful blast of wind sent the closest onlookers rolling.

Fellow knights, the Armor of Victory, and other participants waiting their turn in the Battle Arena were no exception.

And as usual, some were off in their own world.

“Graghhhhhhh!!”

“Arghhhhhh!!”

The duo’s heated swordfight unfolded in the center of the Battle Arena and blinded them to all else.

Each clashed swords and then parried. They crossed paths and struck again. It was a decisive battle no one else could see.

However, the surrounding area was in deep peril.

Those in the arena weren’t the only ones thunderstruck.

Back in the Guardian Tower, Cayna felt the same way as she watched through the screens. After all, she never expected a fight between players to produce such an aftermath. Back in the game, the surrounding area would remain untouched as long as the combating

players didn't use long-range magic or techniques.

Shining Saber and Cohral were levels 427 and 392 respectively. What would happen to the surrounding area if two Transcendentals clashed?

"Um, Guardian?"

"**Yes?**"

"About the barrier between the seats and the main arena..."

"**There is nothing.**"

"Ah, I see. There's noth... Wait, *nothing*?!"

"**Correct,**" it replied with shocking brevity.



Back in the game, any curious, unoccupied onlookers would erect a barrier prior to a PvP battle. It was implicitly understood that they were safe from the techniques and magic that went flying.

Here, Cayna and Opus were the onlookers. She could have sworn there would be safety measures in place. Nevertheless, Cayna had no intention to dive into the fray. Opus was already on the scene, and his inaction surely meant the demon was up to something. Nothing good, no doubt.

Meanwhile, the shock waves and wind pressure began to mix.

Rotary Knife Shot Las Ring Saw

Shining Saber put distance between himself and Cohral before casting a long-range attack that fired multiple rotating, saw-like rings of wind at once. The level of damage depended on the player, but it was not to be taken lightly. Cohral only struck down the projectiles aimed directly at him.

Of course, those that missed their mark flew behind him. These were no match for the eternal and unchanging Battle Arena, but anything else would be torn to pieces.

Every participant besides Opus screamed and ran from the approaching wind slices in a panic, and the makeshift chairs along the wall were instantly mangled. It was a bizarre sight, since there wasn't a single scratch on either the wall or the floor.

All the contestants who had just narrowly escaped death saw this and nearly burst into tears. They trembled and held one another in petrified fear as the very picture of hell threatened to choke them with sobs. The seats were quickly emptied, and it was every man for himself whenever a shock wave flew by. The rest were either weirdos brave enough to see the outcome or young men who scowled hatefully at the Battle Arena's top dogs.

The guards escorted His Majesty outside with utmost haste. Knowing the knight captain was partially responsible for this tragedy was unbearable. There were obvious injuries, but the fact that no one had died yet was a silver lining.

"Hmph!"

This was all thanks to Kuu, who glowed with a white light and sniffed imperiously over Cayna's head. She seemed to be using a subsystem to forcefully divert the flying saws.

Then, the sharp-eyed Armor of Victory spotted safety and made a break for it. Naturally, this refuge was around Opus. He cast Fence as a shield, which allowed that area alone to skirt disaster.

Nonetheless, that didn't mean their fear of the violent gale attack simply disappeared. Cohral was the type to wield his sword with composed clarity, and the Armor of Victory trusted him

unconditionally. However, something like this was so unexpected it was like they didn't even know him anymore. Once everything was over, his comrades planned to force Cohral to his knees and chew him out. However, they weren't out of the woods just yet.

The next surprise to violently bluster into the Battle Arena was not a fiery snake but rather a fiery whip.

Flame Blade Strike Ruben Rose

This attack used a whip that extended from one's blade to instantly mow down a wide-range area. Whether or not it could even be called a sword technique anymore was dubious, but unfortunately for everyone except the players, it most certainly was.

Cohral's whip could cancel out Shining Saber's assault, but the real issue was its trajectory prior to making contact. As long as one knew its flight path, Ruben Rose was relatively harmless. Even so, the end of the whip was faster than the speed of sound, and one miscalculation meant the permanent separation of one's upper and lower half.

Their back-and-forth continued in a similar fashion, and most of the participants who had planned to fight in the Arena ran away.

In the end, Shining Saber reigned victorious. Cohral's loss was merely due to an MP deficiency.

"Good fight."

"Tch. You only won because of your weapon type."

"No, it's mainly 'cause you couldn't handle the level gap, ha-ha-ha."

"You fools should take a look around before anything else."

An irritated voice interrupted the duo's post-battle review. When they reexamined the area, their eyes nearly popped out of their heads.

The Battle Arena was littered in trash and debris. A very small number of spectators rose from the ground and were just happy to be alive. Shining Saber was the only knight left. Cohral and the rest of the Armor of Victory were uninjured, but the adventurer's comrades looked disheveled for some reason.

Opus and Siren stood there without a single scratch, but this fact was irrelevant.

""Wh-who did this?!""

"It was you numbskulls! This is what happens when players go wild!"

The rest of the tournament was pretty much out the window. Even if they tried again the next day, no participant who watched Shining Saber and Cohral fly off the handle would dare challenge them.

"Argh, crap. We went to town."

Shining Saber's head drooped in disappointment; the knight

seemed to have realized that he, of all people, had failed miserably and could expect due punishment for shirking his responsibilities.

“Sorry.”

Likewise, Cohral prostrated *dogeza*-style before his comrades. But although he was ready to be scorned and cursed as a traitor, they greeted him with unexpected warmth.

“Why didn’t you use that power sooner?”

“Exactly. If we knew you could do that, we wouldn’t need to be picky about requests.”

“Join the vanguard next time! You don’t have to be a shield anymore!”

“Let’s make him carry everyone’s stuff for a while as punishment.”

Even their incessant complaints were heartwarming and brought Cohral a sense of relief.

“““““Still, ya better get ready for the lecture of a lifetime!”””””

“...Huh?”

His friends grabbed his limbs and dragged him away. A world of suffering awaited him back at the inn.

“So the Battle Arena didn’t even have a Fence. Kyotaro really only saw the spectators as props, huh?”

As soon as Cohral and the Armor of Victory left, Cayna appeared with Mai-Mai. Kuu had entered Energy Saver Mode and slumped over Cayna’s head.

“Excellent work, Uncle Opus,” said Mai-Mai, bowing.

“Th-thanks.”

Opus grew flustered, and Cayna savored the sight.

“So what next, Shining Saber? Think the tourney can continue?”

“Honestly, even I’m not sure. His Majesty will probably announce a substitute festival.”

The dragoid didn’t seem to know what would happen, either. He could only shrug and shake his head at her question.

Just as the atmosphere eased, everyone felt it. Siren gave Opus’s cloak a firm tug and directed his attention toward the spectator seating.

“Master, I sense a malicious presence.”

“Hmm?”

There stood a young man who had been glaring at Opus for some time. Unsurprisingly, the demon couldn’t ignore his hateful gaze.

The figure who staggered to the front row was a player. He glared at Opus with bloodshot eyes before pointing an accusatory finger.

“At last! I finally found you, you bastaard!” he shouted.

“““““ ...”””””

Despite the man’s fury, Opus looked immensely amused.

“It’s your damn fault my life is a mess! Never thought I’d get

revenge in this world, but this sure is damn convenient!! Hyah-ha-ha-ha!”

Laughter like that would convince anyone the man was crazy. He’d apparently been harboring a huge grudge against Opus.

“Looks like someone got on this guy’s bad side.”

“Yep.”

“Uncle Opus, did you do something to him?”

“Now there’s a loaded question. I don’t recognize him, though.”

“Man, I know just how he feels. So much it hurts. This kind of thing happened to pretty much anyone who fell for one of your war traps and paid the price,” Shining Saber said. His compelling words were spoken from experience.

“You’re still clinging to the game? It would be wise to form a clear distinction between fiction and reality.”

Everyone smacked their foreheads with an expression that said, “*Oh great.*”

Far from any attempt to win the man over or explain himself, Opus decided to relentlessly antagonize him. The man’s face flushed red with fury.

“You’re one to taaaaaaaalk!” he screamed before throwing something in his hand.

“Huh?”

“These are—”

“What the?!”

“Oh my.”

The objects sparkling and sailing through the air were large, round jewels that came in shades of green, creamy white, clear, crimson, pale blue, and dark red. Cayna thought they closely resembled the contents of the Guardian Tower Item Box she had perused the other day.

And that’s exactly what they were.

Each fell to the ground and began to glow as a large shadow oozed from within. An instant later, the shadows materialized to reveal their hulking frames.

A striped snake with a single eye on top of its head.

A dragon with bright red scales.

A black dragon that was one size larger than the red one.

A huge, three-headed dog.

A six-winged *tsuchinoko*.

A flat, blackish-brown rhino with six legs.

All six gave loud, varied calls of *Screeee! Graaaaah!* and *Grrrr!*

The cacophony was tremendous, and Siren tended to the vulnerable Mai-Mai crouched with her ears covered.

“What’re *those*?!”

Shining Saber gawked at the three creatures unfamiliar to him.

"I suppose it can't be helped," Opus murmured. He named each one but offered no further details.

The one-eyed snake was a Roklox.

The crimson beast was a Red Dragon.

The dark one was a Black Dragon.

The three-headed dog was a Cerberus.

The *tsuchinoko* was a High Border.

The six-footed rhino was a behemoth.

Apart from the Roklox, the summonses were all larger than a house and packed the Battle Arena. Everyone had to look up toward the spectator seats to get the full picture.

The young male player who had cast the Simple Summons was close by, but in this case, defeating the jewels' owner wouldn't cancel them out.

"Th-these guys will clear away my resentment! These were super expensive when I bought 'em at auction, but you leave me no choice!"

"M-me too?!" Mai-Mai asked frantically upon realizing she was also a target of his wrath. Although these were Simple Summons, a group of six with an average of level 500 was still more than Mai-Mai or Shining Saber could hope to handle.

"Go! Mess 'em up good!"

Shining Saber drew the Sycophant Sword while Mai-Mai scurried behind Cayna.

"Heeeey! Weren't you one of those great imperial mages?" he asked.

"I don't stand a chance against those creatures. Mother will surely protect me."

Although Cayna *did* intend to protect Mai-Mai, she didn't know how to answer bold declarations like that. As Opus filled both hands with magic, she alone casually observed the situation.

"Hold on. Why are you the only one chilling out?" Shining Saber asked.

"Nah, I was just thinking maybe we shouldn't do anything."

"Seriously? Someone's feelin' confident! You're positive that guy Opus can take care of this?"

Since the role was up for grabs, Shining Saber became the voice of reason.

Time continued to pass, but the summonses made no move. Just as everyone was starting to wonder what in the world was going on, the young man who had instigated the whole ordeal could stand their apathy no longer and exploded.

"Yo! You guys! Whaddaya think you're doing?! Attack them already!"

The Red Dragon yawned, and the Black Dragon started nodding off. The two-meter Roklox was coiled on top of the behemoth, and the High Border preened its feathers.

“What the hell?! Why won’t these idiots do anything?!”

The man yelled for them to get a move on, but the summonses completely ignored him. Just as he began to holler and lash out at them, Cayna said something most cruel. If anything, one could say only she understand the truth of the situation.

“Unfortunately, those guys will never move.”

“What?! How would *you* know?!”

“Because I was the one who put them up for auction to raise money.”

To be blunt, the man froze like plaster. Shining Saber looked at him with pity, and Opus gave an exaggerated sigh. After all, although anyone could use jewels to cast a Simple Summons, no creation could turn on its creator.

The empty, despondent man stood in frozen shock as Shining Saber tied him up with rope and handed him over to the knights. No one was hurt, and there were almost no eyewitnesses, so he’d most likely spend the night in jail for attempted assault.

Kuu released the summonses filling the Battle Arena. They turned into regular magic and vanished.

A number of villagers who had watched the entire live broadcast were seemingly perplexed by the tourney that had vaguely ended up being a standard PvP battle, but at least they didn’t cringe.

In place of the tournament, a makeshift festival was held for two days until the capital was peaceful once more. Moreover, after Shining Saber returned to the knights with the young man, Cayna didn’t catch him around town for quite some time.



Epilogue

“Mother, there is a task I wish to ask of you.”

“You’ve got a job for me, Mai-Mai?”

After the festival that replaced the tourney, Cayna returned to the Adventurers Guild and was informed there was a request for her from the Academy. The client was Mai-Mai, so Cayna had to wonder why she didn’t just tell her personally.

Her daughter, who had been waiting in the principal’s office, explained her proposal.

“I don’t mind, since I’m free, but I can’t imagine what kind of request you have in mind,” Cayna said as she tucked into the cookies served with their tea.

Mai-Mai stared at her mother enviously.

“I submit a similar request to the Adventurers Guild each year, but in short, this is an escort mission.”

“An escort mission? Are you going to another town, Mai-Mai? In that case, I’ll teleport us.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I am not the one in need of an escort. This is for the students.”

“The students, huh? Are they going on a field trip?”

“No, although we will be conducting an outdoor lesson with interested students. They’ll learn how to set up camp and stand guard in a nearby forest.”

“So that’s where I come in? I don’t mind, but isn’t that a bit too much firepower? Are you sure?”

As her mother tilted her head with crossed arms, Mai-Mai’s heart filled with joy. She explained her main reason for asking Cayna.

“Mye—no, Princess Myleene—wishes to participate as well. There will be many aristocratic children, so your presence will give me peace of mind, Mother. Can you do it?”

“Hmm.”

A map was rolled out on the table, and a marker was placed over each intended destination. It was an annual event, so the students knew the area like the backs of their hands. However, what concerned Cayna the most was the fact that these lesson spots sat on the same course the flying column had used in their previous raid. There was a chance their outdoor camps would be directly inundated with monsters and, in a worst-case scenario, end up like the barrier around the Brown Kingdom back in the game. That had to be why her presence would reassure everyone.

Before explaining the Brown Kingdom to Mai-Mai, Cayna decided to talk things over with Opus first and put a pin in the request.

“Just let me think it over. There’s something I want to check, but I’m leaning toward ‘yes.’”

“Thank you, Mother. Now Princess Myleene won’t be upset with me.”

“The request was from Mye?!”

The princess was apparently the true mastermind.

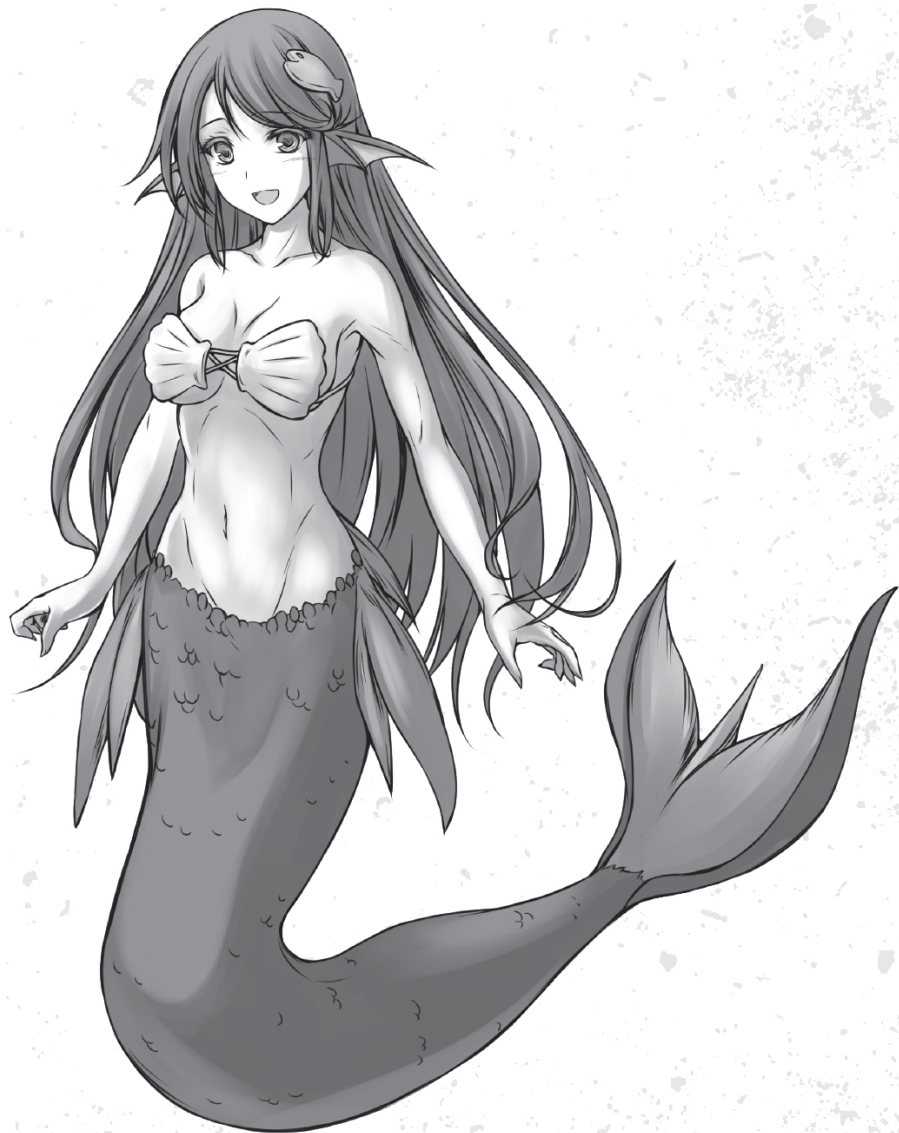
Character Data

Mimily

A mermaid.

Level unknown.

Thanks to a mysterious phenomenon, she was whisked away from somewhere in the ocean and transported to an underground lake. Although an outstanding figure among the merpeople, she was deemed worthless after failing to become queen. She lives on the women's side of the village bathhouse and uses water-bending magic—something all merpeople can do—to run a laundry service. The third biggest breadwinner in the village, her current goal is to repay Cayna for her kindness.



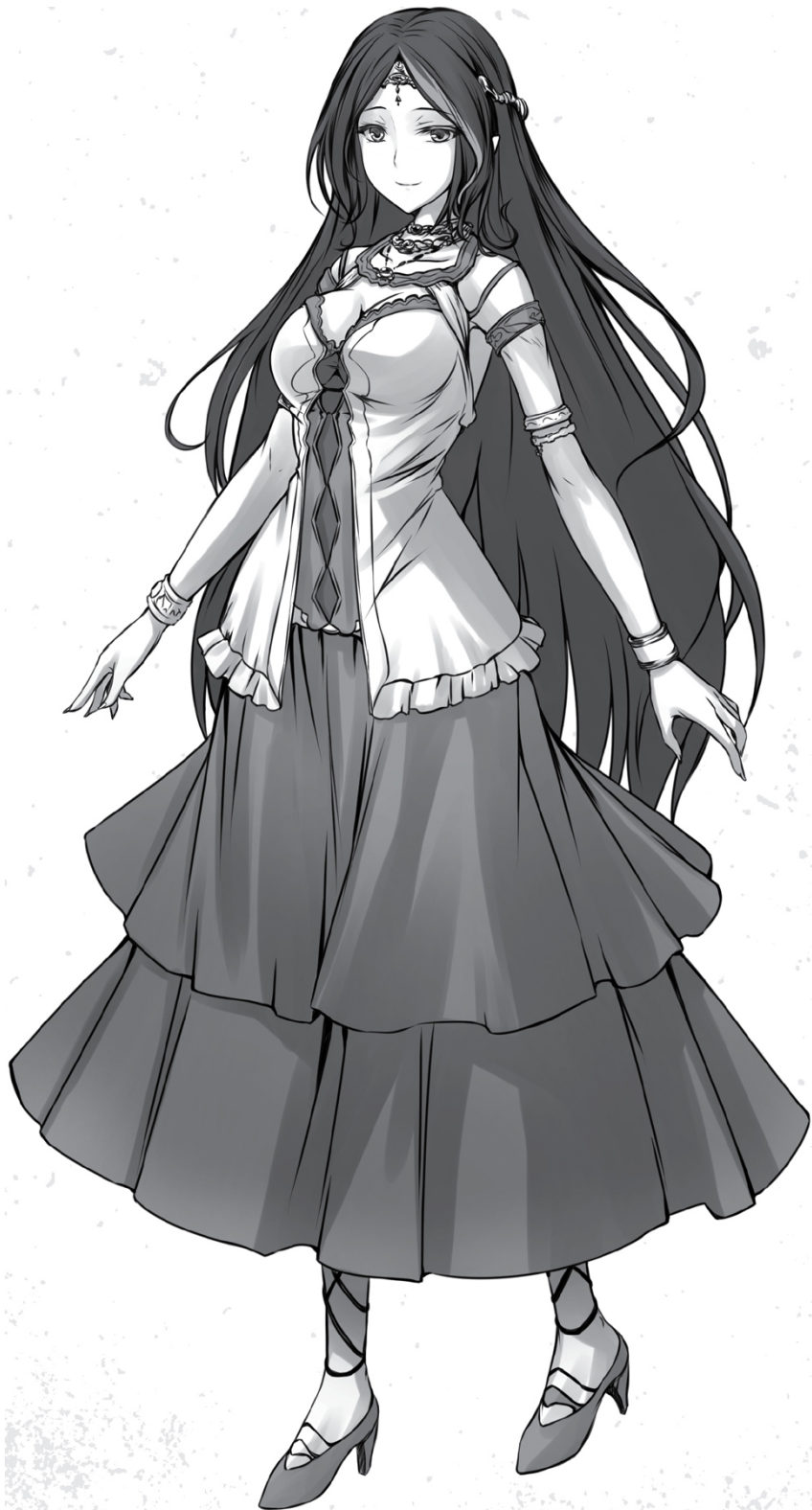
Sahalashade

A high elf.

Level: slightly below 100.

Foster Child of Sahana, a former player in the high elf community who was a little sister figure to Cayna. Somehow ended up as Cayna's niece despite the lack of blood relation.

Sahalashade has ruled Otaloquess for 200 years; she is popular among her people and has many fan clubs throughout the country. Her biggest concern is that she lacks an heir.



Afterword

Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening. I'm the author, Ceez.

The seventh volume is finally here. I'm very sorry for the long wait. (Sob.)

First, we had a manga adaptation, and now there's even going to be an anime. It's all thanks to you, dear readers. Praise be!

Both the website and Twitter account are active, and it's thrilling to watch the world of *Leadale* slowly expand. Personally, I'm also terrified... I have to keep reminding myself this isn't a dream. I'm very grateful to the anime staff, and I can't wait to see everyone come to life.

I get emotional whenever I think about how far I've come, but the conclusion still feels like an eternity away. I better whip my heart into shape and wring out more of the story. (Eek!)

As more characters from the original web version and new characters come together to create new plotlines in the published books, the more I have to tweak. You've probably already noticed, but just like Volume 6, Volume 7 is almost a total rewrite. It's pretty embarrassing; I'm terrible at laying out plans and take forever to write, so once again, I caused an endless amount of trouble. I tricked myself into thinking I wouldn't end up in a time crunch...

The next volume will contain the last chapter of the web novel! I have absolute faith that everything will go as planned.

Once again, I gave my editor, illustrator Tenmaso (thank you, as always, for providing such wonderful images), the book designers, and proofreaders a lot of grief. I'm so sorry!

Tenmaso was such a fine young man when we met up for work... (Bowing.)

These are still troubling times, but let's continue to do our best and never give up! Thank you very much to all those who pick up this book!

Ceez

I'm the artist Tenmaso.

I drew the same characters at the end of this volume as the last time. Roxine sure does show up a lot. She must be a favorite.

テンマソ
Tenmaso



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